

A More Ambitious Boy

by dictionarywrites

Category: Harry Potter

Genre: Adventure, Humor

Language: English

Characters: Fred W., Harry P., Hermione G., Severus S.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-04-14 17:22:24

Updated: 2016-04-26 20:20:30

Packaged: 2016-04-27 18:06:49

Rating: T

Chapters: 32

Words: 73,335

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: When Harry Potter arrived at Hogwarts, he was sorted into the noble house of Salazar Slytherin: from there, his life went downhill in the most chaotic way possible. AU Slytherin!Harry, featuring Hermione&Harry platonic duo, a host of different canon characters and OCs, and more and more canon divergence as the series goes on.

1. Year One: The Sorting

****A/N STUFF:** Okay, so the main story for this series is going to be published here on FFnet, as well as on Ao3. Related ficlets, drabbles and so on are going to be on Ao3 only because I can easily put them in the right series order, and on Ao3 I'm also posting any and all manips and images I make for the series. If you want links to the Ao3 series or my Tumblr, please check out my profile, as I can't hyperlink on this. Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy/keep enjoying the series!**

"Potter, Harry."

Harry glances to Ron, who gives him an encouraging little grin, even though he looks about as green as Harry does, and Harry moves up to the stool at the front of the room; the Great Hall is awash with dozens of whispers and murmurs, murmurs about Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, and Harry hates it, but he can't complain. What would people say then, after all?

He sits, and he stares out for a few seconds, wide-eyed at the hundreds of people staring at him raptly, and then the hat drops over his head and Harry sees nothing but the slightly grimy brim.

"Hmm," says the Hat's voice, quiet and yet loud on the inside of his own head. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent, oh my goodness, yes â€" and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interestingâ€" So where shall I

put you?"

Harry isn't sure what to say " does this hat want an answer? From him? He didn't know he was allowed to choose. He hesitates, considering what he'd read in the copy of Hogwarts: A History Hagrid had dropped onto the top of his pile of books.

Even with what Hagrid had said about Slytherin, and Ron as well, all of them had seemed just fine. Merlin had been a Slytherin, after all, and they're ambitious " is Harry ambitious? He wants to be a good wizard, he wants-

"Oh, Slytherin would be a fine choice for you, my boy." Harry jolts at the sudden invasion of the Hat's voice into his thoughts, but he supposes he shouldn't have forgotten about it " the Hat is in his brain for the moment.

Really?

"Oh, really. You could be great in Slytherin."

Terrible, Ollivander had said, terrible, but great.

"Oh, but so, so great," the Hat assures him, and Harry does his best to suppress the shiver than wants to run down his spine. He does want to be great, he thinks. "Mmm, temper that recklessness, train that ambition" Yes, it's quite obvious now: SLYTHERIN!"

Harry smiles a little as he pushes the brim of the hat off from his eyes, expecting the same applause from the Slytherin table everyone else had gotten, but he doesn't hear any applause.

All of them are just staring at him, as if- don't they want him?

He moves off when McGonagall taps his shoulder all the same, trying to ignore the expression on her face and on the faces of the Weasleys on the Gryffindor table, each of whom look positively betrayed; after the pause, he hears one whoop from the Slytherin table, and then they're cheering, the sound deafening in comparison to the deafening silence from the Gryffindors.

Breathing heavily and glancing to the staff table, where Hagrid looks devastated and McGonagall uncertain, Harry runs to sit with the First Year Slytherins.

* * *

><p>Dinner is awkward, to say the least; Harry offers a quick apology to Draco Malfoy, and much as he's sharp, he seems to have accepted the words, and even gave a short apology of his own. Harry doubts it's all that honest, but the other boy has made the effort, at least. Harry is glad when dinner is done with and they each walk down towards the dungeons; his head had given an awful pang of pain when he'd met his new Head of House's stare, but a few of the elder Slytherins had lightly expressed their belief that the man could read minds, and perhaps it had been an adverse affect to that.<p>

"Potter." Harry stops, and he looks back at the girl before him; she's a tall girl, pretty and with regal features, and Harry notices

the green prefect badge pinned to the breast of her robes. "I'm Afifa Lanjwani: I'm one of your House prefects. You were raised by Muggles, right?"

Harry nods his head at her crisp tone, and his eyes are slightly wide as he looks at her: Afifa does not smile. He swallows as he remembers that Slytherins supposedly take badly to Muggles, and he opens his mouth, but she cuts through it easily.

"You'll take tutelage. Quill usage is expected here. Basic wizarding etiquette, including faux pas, fashion, rough history and common thought. A guide will be on your bed tomorrow morning. It's for Slytherins only, including some House secrets, so please don't share it with outsiders. Okay?"

Harry nods, and she taps him perfunctorily on the shoulder, but somehow the touch is comforting even though her expression is grim; it's not Afifa that addresses the group of First Years but a short, broad-shouldered lad called Francois Richelieu (commonly known, judging by the teasing nudge he'd had from one of the other prefects, as Frank).

"You've been lucky." He speaks bluntly, and he looks from each of the other First Years; Pansy Parkinson is smirking, as is Draco Malfoy; Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle seem completely bored, along with Millicent Bulstrode; Theo Nott and Tracey Davis stand with their arms crossed; Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass, the icy prince and princess of the group, have neutral expressions on their aristocratic faces.

Harry feels out of place.

"You've been sorted into the only house with a fully funded alumnus scheme. The only house with more rooms than merely dormitories and a common room. The only house with a view of the lake - and you'll see when you get in your dorms-" He speaks with a teasing grin on his face, winking at them, but then he soberes again: "But you're also going to be hated on principle. You should note that Slytherins have a bad reputation.

People think of us as elitists, Death Eaters, dark magic practitioners, necromancers, abusers, monsters. Voldemort was a Slytherin, they say." Harry is surprised, and judging by the sharp gasps from some of those beside him, the others are as well, but Francois says it with an easy confidence.

"They don't mention Merlin. Slytherin will no more make you a villain than Gryffindor will make you a hero, but the other houses will treat you with extreme will not isolate each other. You will not bully each other. You will stand strong, and you will be united, or we'll make your lives Hell."

Harry swallows as Francois meets his gaze, just for a moment, and then he says, "Boys with me, girls with Sarah." and he breaks his stare.

Draco, Harry, Crabbe, Goyle, Zabini and Nott trail after the apparent head prefect of Slytherin house, and he leads them down a series of steps and a long corridor. Light is dim with a greenish tinge here, and it's quite chilly, but then Francois gestures to three doors,

each emblazoned with burnished black letters.

****FIRST YEAR****

****Draco Malfoy & Harry Potter ****

****FIRST YEAR****

****Blaise Zabini & Theodore Nott****

****FIRST YEAR****

****Vincent Crabbe & Gregory Goyle****

"These will be your rooms until you leave school. The other houses have group dorm rooms, but big rooms aren't very good down here â€" we're built right against and under the lake in places, so we like to have a lot of supporting walls. In you go, lads. We'll wake you up in the morning." The corridor has each year's rooms settled together, and to their right are the second year rooms, the seventh year rooms across from them.

Draco leads the way, but when Harry steps into their dormitory he gasps, staring up at the ceiling with his mouth wide open and his green eyes wide. The ceiling has been enchanted with the same charm in the Hogwarts Great Hall, but instead of displaying the night sky above, it displays the lake, and Harry is amazed.

The lamp light is tinted green, and Harry steps towards the bed to the right as Draco strays to the left; he peers at the bed with curiosity â€" it has curtains, but no canopy.

"It's so you can look straight up if you can't sleep. Father told me about it," Malfoy supplies, and he doesn't seem smug about it; instead, there's an honest smile on his features, and he too looks up at the ceiling, smile fond. Harry's trunk has been set at the bottom of his bed like an ottoman, and to the side is a wardrobe. On the bed are three books: A Serpentine History, An Introduction to the Wizarding World and Basic Charms and Household Enchantments.

"What's your third one?" Harry hesitates, and then he says, "My aunt and uncle are Muggles. Diagon Alley was my first time with magical stuff. It's a guidebook, I think."

Draco lets out a smug, amused sound, and Harry turns his head, focusing on getting undressed and getting into bed, and he lies back on the bed, staring up at the empty water. It doesn't remain empty, though: after a few minutes, just as when Harry's eyelids are beginning to droop, mermaids come into view, and he stares up at them, sleepily, as they begin to dance in the green-tinted moonlight filtering from above.

Is he dreaming? Mermaids can't possibly be real-

But he sleeps before he can consider it further.

2. Year One: Harry's First Friend

Harry is flushed a deep red as he storms out of the castle and down

the path through the grounds; Hagrid had sent him a short note earlier asking him down to tea, though the script had been hesitant and slightly crumpled, as if Hagrid had done it and redone it a few times. He doesn't mind, and he's not going to complain about it: "There isn't a wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin." sticks in his mind, but Hagrid invited him nonetheless.

Still though, he goes alone, and when he knocks on Hagrid's door the other man lets him in immediately, an uncertain and cautious expression fading from his overlarge features when he gets a glance at Harry's humiliated one.

"What's wrong?" comes the immediate question as he ushers Harry to sit down and begins to make him a cup of tea, and Harry huffs out a noise, holding back the distinct and sudden wish to cry.

"Snape." That's not strictly true â€" it's not just Snape. Snape had only been the end of it; that morning, Frank Richelieu had said lightly that Severus Snape, Potions Master and Head of Slytherin, tended to favour Slytherin house more than the others, but the fact remained that one oughtn't provoke him all the same.

Severus Snape had not favoured Harry at all. He'd bombarded him with questions as soon as he'd sat down, and Harry hadn't gotten any of them right â€" he'd only had time to study his new books from the prefects, and hadn't thought to memorize the bloody textbook.

Ron Weasley had snickered at this in Potions, and even Hermione Granger had turned her nose up at him when he'd glanced her way â€" the Slytherins were mostly weird, with all kinds of social rules Harry just didn't bloody know, so he'd ended up partnered with Neville Longbottom in Potions-

And before all that it had been Draco Malfoy, who had mirthfully crowed that Harry had been raised by Muggles when he quietly asked what wizarding magazines there were, (though Afifa Lanjwani had cuffed him hard upside the head, which had shut him up).

He tells Hagrid all of this in a rapid and messy fashion, rushed and emotional, and Hagrid, to his credit, listens as if Harry hadn't just been sorted into the house "all dark wizards come from".

"Well, yer in Slytherin now, Harry." Hagrid says sagely, with the same tone of someone pointing out that you had chosen to live with several dozen scorpions in your bed.

"Snakes are vicious. Erâ€¦ How'd yeh get on in yer lessons?" He pushes a cup of tea into Harry's hands, shaking with anxiety or anger or he doesn't know what, but Harry drinks, and it's so sweet he almost smiles. Hagrid's trying, after all.

"They were okay. Hermione was a bit snippy with me."

"The Muggleborn lass, black girl with the curly hair?" Harry nods, and Hagrid gives a quiet hum. He looks like he's carefully considering his next words, and Harry looks up at him, sipping at his tea. "Seems to me she'll think yeh'll be a purist, Harry. Given yer, er, house an' all."

They talk for a while longer â€" it's only when Harry notices the

newspaper clipping, from Vault 713, that Hagrid hurriedly suggests he go up to the castle again " but not before firmly insisting Harry is welcome to visit when he pleases.

At least someone at Hogwarts likes him.

* * *

><p>Harry sits, with resolution evident on his features, across from Hermione Granger in the library, meeting her unimpressed gaze with a squared chin. He hangs his bag on the back of his chair, straightens himself up and looks right at her.<p>

"There is no difference, you know," Hermione says in a superior tone, not looking up from the thick, leatherbound volume opened on the table in front of her. Books are stacked all around her, an essay half-completed to her right. "Monkswood and Wolfsbane are the same."

"Also known as aconite," Harry agrees. "I know that now." Granger humphs, and then Harry says, tone biting, "Not everyone has relatives that like their magic, you know. My Aunt and Uncle knew about it but kept me in the dark, then tried to lock me up so I couldn't get my letter." This sort of honesty is blunt and awkward on his tongue, difficult to admit; he's never talked about his relatives to anyone in terms of how they actually are, but he is determined to be friends with Hermione Granger, and she won't talk to him if she thinks of him as some arrogant famous Slytherin.

Hermione Granger is quiet, and she tears her gaze away from her book to stare at him, her lips parting, eyes widened. She hesitates, and then asks, "How do I know you're not lying? George Weasley says Slytherins lie all the time."

"Francois Richelieu says the Weasley twins bully Slytherin kids, and enjoy making chaos. Besides, why would I lie?" Harry demands.

"Because you want to copy my homework." Harry scoffs.

"I don't want to copy your homework! I want to be your friend. You're smart " smarter than any of the other Gryffindors, and you're actually quite nice, when you're not busy being so full of yourself." She looks furious.

"Full of myself!?"

"Oh, are you doing magic? Let's see it then!" Harry says, mimicking the snooty tone she'd used on the train, and she falters, anger fading for a minute. "I just want to be your friend, Hermione. I don't need to copy your homework." She looks at him suspiciously, and he says, "I'll beat you to the top of the class, I bet." She rolls her eyes, looking like she doesn't believe him " Harry doesn't actually believe himself, but it doesn't mean he can't foster the competitive nature of Gryffindors, and she has to be friends with someone.

She doesn't have any other friends in Gryffindor " she was alone all their first day, and even now, two days later, Ron Weasley seems to hate her and no one else seems to like her. Harry wants friends

“ he's never really had friends before, not for long, and she might be headstrong, but she seemed decent on the train.

Just a bit of a know-it-all, and really, what's wrong with that?

Hermione's face remains stony, and so Harry shrugs, throwing his bag onto the table and beginning to pack up his books again. "Fine. I just thought you could rise above that sort of stupid house bias. Guess I was wrong."

"Wait," she's staring at him, looking him up and down, and then she says, "You make one snobby comment, and we're done."

Harry grins. "I'll leave the snobby comments to you. You've only made six already." She looks angry again, but when he winks, her fury melts into a rueful little grin. She's got buck teeth, he notices, but she's not really ugly or anything: Parkinson seems to be convinced that all the non-Slytherin First Years are ugly, but Harry doesn't really think any of them are.

He sits down, and then, after a short pause, he puts out a hand for her to shake.

"Start over? I'm Harry. Just Harry."

There's a short pause, and then she takes his hand, shaking it with resolution in the movement. She still seems cautious, but he's caught her trust, just for a little bit, and he feels relief flood through him, relief and excitement and delight.

"Okay, Harry. I'm Hermione Granger." Her smile becomes a bit more shy, and Harry suppresses an urge to laugh out loud.

Hermione Granger: Harry's first friend.

3. Year One: The Importance of Ideas

Harry stamps into the Slytherin common room, and he pushes past the two prefects that try and hold him back and ask if he's alright; his face is bright red and he just can't get over the complete humiliation flooding through him. He barely even feels anger, he just feels sick and embarrassed and upset.

He had defended Ron Weasley when Malfoy had insulted the state of his secondhand school books, and Ron had only spat that he didn't need any defence from a slimy snake. Well, Harry knows exactly how he's going to deal with that.

Dear Mrs Weasley,

He doesn't know her first name, but that doesn't matter, not really. He doesn't need her first name, and using her first name would only make him seem older than he is. He wants her to think of him as young right now, young and vulnerable.

I'm sorry if this letter is disturbing you but I just wanted to

_thank you for giving me so much help on Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ _

a few weeks ago, when I was on my way to Hogwarts for

the first time.

I was really lost, to be honest, as I've never really

experienced the wizarding world before and no one gave me

any instructions for finding the platform (I was raised by

my aunt and uncle, who are Muggles and don't approve of

magic), and I just wanted to say properly how grateful I am.

It's unfortunate sad that your son, Ron, and I won't be

friends now, as he's taken really unkindly to how I was

sorted into Slytherin and made it obvious he doesn't want to

talk to me now, but I didn't want that to affect me thanking

you

for your help.

So thank you so much Mrs Weasley! I was really lucky to run

into one of the nicest witches in the train station.

Yours truly,

Harry James Potter

He makes to roll the parchment up to go and send, but he knocks his ink bottle over and grabs it just as it splatters on the bottom of the page. He mutters irritably, but then, struck by a sudden thought, he grabs at the quill again.

PS: Sorry for the ink blots. I'm still getting used to using

quills

and ink.

He looks down at his scrawled handwriting upon the page, and he smirks with an almost-bitter satisfaction "Harry isn't a cruel boy, not as a rule, and he doesn't want to hurt Ron, but he wants something to make him think twice about being so horrible. He doesn't want to actually be nasty to him, doesn't want to call him names or anything.

Harry really does want to be his friend, but-

"You alright, Potter?" Prefect Lanjwani's tone doesn't really offer space for him to argue with her, and she stands in his and Draco's dormitory doorway, her arms crossed over her chest and her expression rather stern.

"Yes, yeah, Afifa, I'm fine." Lanjwani frowns at him, her pretty

forehead furrowing and showing wrinkles, and Harry adds, "I'm sorting it out, I promise. I'd come to you if I needed help."

This, she accepts, and she gives a simple nod, stepping back down the hall. Harry dries the parchment's ink with a charm — the little book of charms had had almost a hundred spells, and one of the easiest to learn was a very simple one for drying ink. Harry wishes Wingardium Leviosa was as easy, but he's not nearly as lucky. He rolls his piece of parchment up, tying it up, and makes his way out.

He begins to walk out of the common room, up through the dungeons and to the entrance hall, but it's there that he's stopped short, two more Weasleys appearing in front of him. Harry freezes, staring between Fred and George, and his hand goes to his wand and holds it out — strange, how swiftly that's become instinct.

He doesn't even know any hexes yet, but he supposes he could always use a cleaning charm on them. George's shoes could do with a polish.

"Oooh, look at that, George." They're both smirking, and Harry looks between them in the same hurried way he used to look between Dudley and Dudley's friends when they had him cornered, but they're years older than him — Harry doesn't think running away would do him much good.

"Oh, I know, Fred. Suddenly not so friendly, is he?" George tuts.

"Anyone'd think we wanted to do him harm." Fred Weasley is smirking at the idea, and Harry glances in the mirrored shield of the knight to his right, but there are no other Slytherins behind him — the entrance hall is, unfortunately, empty, and the twins are between him and the entrance to the great hall.

"You do do Slytherins harm."

"Harm? Not at all. The occasional prank here and there—"

"A joke or two—"

"Just a laugh—"

"I don't want a laugh, just want to go to the owlery."

"You sending a letter to your folks?" George's face is softer than his brother's as he asks the question, his smirk replaced by a gentler smile, something warmer. Harry hesitates: he can lie, and maybe the sentimental George will let him past, or he can tell the truth, and maybe they'll be too scared not to. She's their mum as well.

"I'm sending one to your mum, actually. Just wanted to thank her for help on the platform, but I guess I can add a postscript about you two." George looks as horrified as Harry had hoped, but Fred grins.

"You sneaky little sod," Fred Weasley proclaims, as if it's the biggest compliment he could ever bestow, and with a bow, not seeming

intimidated in the least, he steps aside. George takes a similar step, but then he says, "We weren't going to have a go, by the way, Potter. Just wanted to see if the snakes had corrupted you."

"Seems they have," Fred says, apparently delighted by Harry's nefarious threat of writing to their mother. What a weirdo. Harry slowly lowers his wand, and he sets it into his pocket again before, with a moment's more caution, offering a small smile.

"Seems like you'd have corrupted me if I'd been in Gryffindor anyway."

"He's got us pegged, hasn't he, Fred?"

"Seems like he does, George. Cleverer than little Ronnie, anyway," Fred says agreeably, and adds, "We'd best tell Ginny about this. Maybe she'll stop being in such awe of him."

"Awe?" Harry repeats, a bit uncomfortable, but the two of them just shoot him twin grins.

"We'll see you around, Potter."

"Tell Mum we'll pick up that toilet seat."

Harry laughs despite himself, and he watches the two older boys walk away, making his way out onto the grounds.

* * *

><p>"So, what do you think is on the third floor, Hermione?"<p>

"What?" Harry's in a better mood when he sits down with his Gryffindor friend in the library, and she stares at him, evidently discomfited at his question.

"You know, the third floor. What do you think it is?"

"It doesn't matter." comes the firm insistence, stubborn and particular. "It's out of bounds, and it's dangerous. You heard what Dumbledore said."

"But don't you want to know?"

"It could kill us, Harry! Or worse, get us expelled."

"What if it's books, Hermione? Complicated books no one's been allowed to read for years and years?"

The ghost of curiosity on her features lasts only a fraction of a second. "Let's just do our Herbology essay, Harry."

Harry relents and picks up his quill; he'd really only been considering it after hearing a few of the sixth years discuss it over magical poker in the Slytherin common room â€" it's not that he really wants to know, not enough to actually go and see, but he's curious. And his mind, working as it does, flickers back to the grubby brown package Hagrid had collected from Vault 713, the grubby brown package that someone had broken into Gringotts to steal.

* * *

><p>Harry smiles at Hedwig when she comes down to him at breakfast that morning, and he strokes her chest with two knuckles as he looks over the letter.<p>

"Who's that from, Potter?"

"Molly Weasley," Harry answers distractedly, and he ignores Malfoy's snicker as his eyes scan over the page, noting the woman's first name at the bottom in a looping and rushed script.

Dear Harry,

Oh, bless you for being such a thoughtful young man!

I said to my husband, Arthur, that you'd been so terribly

polite at the station, and how I'm sure you'll grow up

to be charming! I am very sorry to hear about Ronald's

rudeness, and I just want to make sure you know that we

did not raise our children to be rude to anyone based

on anything so petty as their Hogwarts house!

Harry doubts this is completely true, but he won't point that out when he writes her back.

I will be having a word with Ronald, and I just want

to assure you, Harry, that a boy as kind as you will

always be welcome in our house, and if you ever want

to write me for anything at all, please do!

Yours,

Molly Weasley

PS. Make sure you eat up, Harry. You seemed so skinny

at the station!

She's a nice woman, Mrs Molly Weasley â€" Harry can practically feel her maternity radiating from the page of parchment, and he smiles a little despite himself â€" he'll keep writing to her, he thinks; she's so nice, and Harry can't help but feel warm at the idea of someone worrying about him. No one's ever really worried about him before, without counting the Dursleys worrying that he's having too much fun at school.

"Why would you want to write to that broodmother, Harry?" He and Draco are on first name terms now. Harry smirks at him, and he feels a bit guilty for having used Mrs Weasley like this; he points up. A tired, old and grey looking owl flaps tiredly into the hall, having

lagged behind the rest. Within its talons, bright scarlet and exactly like the picture Harry had seen in An Introduction to the Wizarding World.

As one, the lips of the other Slytherin first years part, and all of their eyes widen. It takes a few more seconds before the first, harsh "RONALD WEASLEY! HOW COULD YOU BE SO CRUEL!?" echoes across the room.

Ron Weasley runs from the great hall with his letter held in front of him as Mrs Weasley screeches about the impropriety of being mean to a boy with dead parents, and, slightly embarrassing though it might be for an entire hall of people to hear someone else's mum worrying about him at high volume, it's worth it to see how red Ron's face is.

"Well done, Potter." Afifa Lanjwani's hand is upon Harry's shoulder, and Harry's guilt, small and niggling at his belly, fades away, replaced with a sense of pride as she smirks down at him. "That should teach the rest of you what a letter can do."

Her words linger in Harry's mind as she walks away, and he frowns a little, thoughtful, as he looks at Molly Weasley's letter in his hand. Letters can do an awful lot indeed.

4. Year One: Letters And Alliances

Malfoy is laughing, and Harry cannot help but be annoyed by it, but he fakes a laugh with the Slytherins, holding out his hands and ignoring, for the time being, the upset looks on the faces of the Gryffindors. Hermione looks ready to strangle him with her bare hands as he says, "Ha, pass it here, Draco!"

He catches the Remembrall with ease, and then the laughter drops abruptly from his face. He holds the little curiosity out to Hermione with a stony expression on his face, and her outrage is gone in a heartbeat as she meets his eyes. She's starting to really trust him now, after a few weeks together, and she neatly drops the Remembrall inside her robes. Draco's expression of shock would be comedic if Harry wasn't trying to rub it in.

"Don't be a pillock, Draco. Longbottom's a nervous wreck, you don't need to bully him further."

Draco's cheeks go pink, but the Gryffindors don't jeer at him: they seem too shocked, in truth, by the fact that a snake stood up for one of their own housemates.

"What are you standing up for Longbottom for, Potter?" Oh, so it's like that?

"What are you bullying him for, Malfoy?" Harry just doesn't want anyone to be victimized, if truth be told, and he's not going to let Malfoy be so horrible just because the victim isn't a Slytherin. Malfoy's mouth opens, and then it closes as he considers his answer,

"Because he's pathetic, Potter."

"What's more pathetic, Malfoy? Being a bit of a nervous kid, or being a sadist?"

Malfoy's eyes widen and he scowls, crossing his arms over his chest, but then, as if only just realizing the Gryffindors are watching him raptly, he holds out his hand to shake. Draco's palm is cold against Harry's own, and they stare into each other's eyes as they shake hands.

"What's a sadist?"

"Someone who likes hurting other people."

Harry ignores the late titter of Lavender Brown after his comment is explained for her, and he shakes Malfoy's hand: it's best, after all, to present a united front to the lions, even though their disagreement is far from over. He'd read in the Slytherin handbook that stuff like this is usually continued in the common room with a prefect present as a sort of "judge", so that won't be fun, but it'll be better than if one of the prefects yells at them for showing such weakness in front of another house.

"That was so brave of you, Harry." Hermione speaks quietly to him as they walk up to the hospital wing, and Harry offers her a little grin. "I'd be careful saying things like that to me, Hermione. You might get me discharged."

She laughs at that, and she takes the Remembrall out of her robes as they come in.

"What are you two here for?" asks Madam Pomfrey in a brisk tone.

"We're just here to see Neville, Ma'am," Harry says, and he sees Madam Pomfrey's gaze flicker from Harry's scar to his crest and then back to his face again; to his surprise, her slightly irritable expression fades to a smile.

"And you too?" Her gaze goes between their differing uniforms, and her smile widens a little: she's in favour of mixing houses, then. Harry files this for future reference â€" most people just seem distrustful.

"Yes, Ma'am," Hermione nods, and the matron bustles away. She's quite a skinny woman, but she bustles very well. They both move forwards, then, and Neville is washing his mouth out with a glass of water, apparently gargling away the taste of the intimidating potion on the dresser beside him: SKELE-GRO, as it's appellated by the skeleton-shaped bottle.

"We brought you your Remembrall, Neville."

"Oh, thank you, Her-" Neville stops short, and Harry says nothing as she holds out the glass sphere to her house mate, trying not to be upset by the slight alarm on the other boy's face as he looks at Harry's own.

"I got it back from Draco for you. I just wanted to let you know we're not all the same." Neville's eyes look like they're about to drop out of his eye sockets.

"Oh. Um- um thanks, er-"

"Harry." He speaks before Neville can call him Potter, and to his surprise, a small smile breaks out on the other boy's chubby face.

"Oh. Thanks, Harry." Hermione is beaming, and she's so pretty when she smiles like that â€" she doesn't often, Harry has noticed, as she seems to be a bit self-conscious about her teeth, but it's nice to see her smile.

"How's your arm, Neville?" Hermione asks, sitting down on the edge of his bed as Harry drops into the chair beside it, and Neville fingers the glowing sphere in his good hand as he answers.

"Oh, it's, um, it's okay-"

* * *

><p>Harry writes AUGUSTA LONGBOTTOM with chalk on the top of the list on his blackboard, and Draco hovers in the doorway.<p>

"What is that?"

"Neville's grandmother," Harry answers in a disconcerted tone, slightly perplexed by the referring to an old lady called "Augusta" as a that. Draco huffs and rolls his eyes, shaking his head.

"No, not Longbottom's gran â€" that."

With a vehement jab of one alabaster, slender finger, he points at the blackboard.

"Professor McGonagall let me have it from one of the spare classrooms. It's on my side of the room." Harry says reasonably, and he points to the invisible line the both of them had drawn through the centre of their shared room. Draco puts one hand to his face, and he looks so exasperated for a second that Harry feels like laughing. Draco's so old, for a boy of eleven.

"I know it's a blackboard, Potter. What I'm asking is why?"

"You didn't ask why, Draco."

"Potter."

"I'm writing letters."

Draco is quiet for a second, grey gaze flickering appraisingly over the board, and then he says, "I don't think that snowy owl can carry a blackboard, Potter." Harry laughs, and he doesn't miss the way Draco's lips twitch with a sort of pride at having made his room mate guffaw so loudly.

"I'm just writing names on it. I'm gonna send a lot."

Draco's ice-coloured eyes look at to the blackboard, scanning over each name written in white chalk:

AUGUSTA LONGBOTTOM

LUCIUS MALFOY

AMELIA BONES

ANDROMEDA TONKS

FLOREAN FORTESCUE

DEDALUS DIGGLE...

"What are you writing Diggle for? The man's a loon." Draco's question comes, presumably, as a preface to asking why Harry's writing to his father. Harry is guessing he's reading the worry on Draco's face right, anyway.

"I met him when I was 9. Thought I'd ask him where he buys his top hats." Draco Malfoy stares at him, his expression a mix of confusion and slight disgust.

"His top hats?"

"Yeah. He wears a red one."

"I know he- but why?" Harry taps the side of his nose, and he remembers after a second of Draco's mildly concerned facial expression that Draco is a Pureblood, and that he's not familiar with the meaning of that particular Muggle mannerism.

"That's for me to know, and you to find out."

"Hmph." comes Draco's huffed, slightly irritated response, and he begins to undress for bed as Harry sets the chalk aside.

5. Year One: Expected Recklessness

"TROLL! IN THE DUNGEONS!" Quirrell sways, just for a few moments, and adds, "Thought you ought to know."

As he drops forwards and down in a dead faint, screams break out across the Halloween feast, and it's only when large firecrackers burst from Dumbledore's wand that everyone shuts up.

"Prefects! Lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

"Ignore him! Slytherins, stay where you are."

Francois speaks loudly above the roar as the others begin to file out of the hall. Dumbledore, as is apparently common for him from what the older Slytherins have said, had apparently forgotten where their house is. The others continue to move out of the room, except one red-and-gold clad Gryffindor.

"Harry!"

"Neville, you need to go upstairs â€" we'll be fine in here, you guys are up in the tow-"

"Harry, Hermione isn't here. She was crying in one of the girl's bathrooms â€" she doesn't know about the troll!" Harry's blood runs cold as he stares at Neville's panicked face.

"Potter," comes Blaise's alarmed tone.

"Potter, don't you dare-" Malfoy chimes in, horror on his face.

"Oh, Merlin," Nott mutters, and clutches at his own forehead in tired resignation as Harry runs toward the door and slips out between two Hufflepuffs. He'd left Neville behind â€" and, in fairness, that's probably for the best, as Harry just needs to get one person away from the troll, and if Neville were to faint it'd be a bit hard to drag him away.

"Hermione!" He yells down the corridor, and he rushes to the bathroom at high speed, skidding on the flat tile as he enters.

"H-Harry?" Hermione's face is wet with tears as she peeks out of a bathroom stall, and Harry can't help but feel a sharp pang of pity in his chest; he's going to have a go at whoever made his friend feel this way later, but for now they need to get out. He grabs at her hand and begins pulling her toward the door, but she freezes in her place.

"There's a troll, Hermione, we have to-"

"Ha- Harry-"

"No, we have to-"

"Harry."

The stench hits him, and Harry looks up and around, where the troll stands in the doorway. It's huge, and the stinj it gives off is overpowering; its skin is grey and thick, and it must be twelve feet tall, a thick, oaken club hanging from one of its stubby hands and trailing on the stone.

"Oh, God." Harry pulls Hermione across the room at speed and she runs, stumbles, with him: the troll follows, its small, stupid head tilting to the side. Harry runs desperately through the few spells he knows, and settles on one of the ones that he can do.

"Right, okay, Hermione, listen to me â€" get your wand. Aim for its eyes," he tries to keep his tone reasonable as he holds up his hand, forcing himself not to shake.

"Harry, we don't know any spells-" Even as she argues, Hermione's holding up her wand like he is.

"Listen to me. Aim for its eyes-"

Both of them shakily raise their wands higher as the troll advances, steps making loud, rumbling stomps on the tiled floor and cracking it in places.

"Say Scourigify on the count of three, and then we split up, you jump to the right, and I jump to the left. Okay?"

"But what does it-"

"WE HAVEN'T GOT TIME, HERMIONE-"

"Right, right, okay, one- two- three-"

"Scourigify!"

There comes a somewhat sickening sound of soapy, invisible brushes scrubbing over bulging, yellowed eyes. The troll gives an earsplitting howl, and the two of them jump apart, running for the door as it brings the thick bludgeon it had in its hand onto the floor and throws tile and stone into the air.

Harry slams the door shut as they leave, turning the key in the lock, and then he collapses backwards " but he doesn't hit the floor. No, that would be far too lucky for Harry Potter: his back hits, instead, the scowling form of Professor Severus Snape.

"Oh, God." Harry whispers, and Snape grabs him by back of his robe, pulling him away from him and shoving him to stand with Hermione: McGonagall, Quirrell and Dumbledore are all assembled " they probably heard the yell.

"Professors!"

"We didn't knock it out. We just locked it in," Harry says hurriedly.

McGonagall huffs a sigh as Quirrell whimpers. "Severus, shall we?" Her tone seems more like the one you'd use to get rid of a stubborn dust bunny than a twelve foot troll, but Harry's Head of House doesn't bat an eyebrow. Snape adjusts his sleeves, and he follows McGonagall into the bathroom with the same air of purpose: Quirrell, with a quick murmur to Dumbledore, moves down the corridor and leans against the wall, fanning himself with one shaking hand.

"How ever did you manage to evade a troll, Mr Potter, Ms Granger?" Dumbledore's eyes are twinkling in a way that Harry can't really comprehend " is he amused? Does he find it funny that two eleven-year-olds just fought a troll?

"Er-"

"It was my fault, Professor." Harry stares at Hermione, unable to say anything. "I thought I could deal with the troll myself, so I went looking for it. Harry's the only reason I'm not dead right now."

"Is that true, Mr Potter?" Dumbledore asks, eyes twinkling with a further intensity.

"Um, n-" Hermione elbows him hard in the side, which Dumbledore politely pretends not to notice.

"Yes, sir." Harry says through gritted teeth.

"Mr Potter," Snape speaks silkily, and to Harry's complete surprise, he is smirking slightly, lip twitched up at one corner into a horrifying parody of a self-satisfied smile.

"If you would be so kind as to tell Professor McGonagall and myself- which of you thought to utilize a simple cleaning charm on the troll's eyes?"

"Me, sir," Harry says somewhat guilty, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. "I, um, I didn't know any other spells except one to dry ink and one to iron clothes, and its skin looked really thick and I didn't think-"

"Shut up, Mr Potter."

"Yes, sir," Harry breathes out, gasping in breaths after getting a bit too worried and spitting out one word after another.

"Twenty points to Slytherin, Mr Potter, for ingenuity in the face of certain death." The way Snape says death is more than terrifying, but Harry tries to ignore it as McGonagall stands up beside him, and says crisply,

"Fifty points from Gryffindor, Ms Granger, for being so stupid as to attempt suicide by troll."

"And for being unlucky to have a Head of House that doesn't even notice when you're not at dinner, I guess," Harry says bluntly, and McGonagall looks at him with fury on her features, but she doesn't bite at him immediately.

"How dare you?"

"Mr Potter, I believe Ms Granger said she went looking for the troll after Professor Quirrell's call for alarm," Professor Dumbledore says.

"She did say that, sir. But what actually happened-"

"Harry!" Hermione protests, but Harry ignores her.

"Is that someone from your pit of lions made her cry. At least in my house we display loyalty. To the right people, that is."

He says this with a glance at Hermione, who looks furious as she stares at him. McGonagall is very, very red in the face, and Harry opens his mouth to speak further, but Snape's hand settles on his shoulder and his thumb and forefinger squeeze hard at the junction of his neck and shoulder: Harry chokes out a short noise of pain, and shuts his mouth.

"I believe I shall remove my loyal snake to the dungeons," Snape says in a light, soft murmur, and then he turns Harry with him, striding down the corridor with Harry next to him. It's after they're two corridors away and Harry knows that McGonagall won't hear him that he asks,

"So I have two weeks of detention, then, sir?"

"I believe a month will be sufficient, Potter."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"No, Potter, you are not," Snape says, with a fatigue that seems to be a bit early for barely a month into the year. "Potter, I would like to ensure that you realize your arrogance is not a quality I find endearing. In the event of a repetition, you will wish th-

"Sir, is your leg alright?" Harry speaks suddenly as he notices something off about the other man's stride, and he looks at a tear in the other's robes; blood shows on the black fabric, illuminated thanks to the flickering firelight of the torches on the walls. Had the troll got him? Snape is horrible to him (Harry knows full well the points were a crow over McGonagall rather than a boon for him), but Harry can't not feel guilty about him sustaining an injury from the troll.

"Mr Potter, I am talk-

"Sir, you're bleeding, are you okay? Did the troll get you? I'm so sorry, I can walk down to the common room-

"Potter-

"You really should go and see Madam Pom-

"Potter!" Snape snaps, and Harry flinches back at the sharp raise in tone. He stares at the other man, his eyes wide. Snape's face is not angry, as such, but certainly curled into an irritated snarl, and then it fades into impassivity.

"Go to bed. And in the event that your essay for tomorrow is not completed, regardless of this evening's misadventure, you will instead serve two months of detention with me."

"It's already done, sir. can bring it to you now, if you like."

"One month and one week for your cheek, Potter. Go. To. Bed."

"Good night, Professor Snape," Harry says obediently, and he tries not to chuckle to himself as he rushes down to the common room: he does hope Snape's leg will be fine, though.

6. Year One: Curiosities

Potions, even with Snape's threat in mind, is actually alright â€" except, unfortunately, for the fact that Hermione is refusing to speak to him. She gave one sharp comment about how could you be so disrespectful, and then ignored him for the rest of the lesson, even when he asked her to pass the daisy stems.

His other lessons, at least, all went well â€" until Transfiguration last period.

"What is that, Potter?" Harry looks up from his Transfiguration notes as he very neatly and carefully transcribes them from the board, peering up at McGonagall through his glasses. She really does hate him at the moment, and he hopes it wears off, because she's more than a little terrifying. She points to the notes stacked on the desk from his back, and he looks at them.

"Oh, they're just my notes from last week, Ma-"

"Is Augusta Longbottom offering you tutelage in Transfiguration, Potter?" Harry flushes pink as some of the Hufflepuffs titter, and he moves to grab the stack and put them into his bag, but McGonagall stops him short, grasping at the letter on top.

"Professor McGonagall, that's private correspondence. I must have picked up my letters instead of my notes this morning."

McGonagall ignores him, scanning the page, and Harry huffs out an irritated sound; she begins to look through the pages, and it's a stack of seven: two from Molly Weasley, and then new replies from Amelia Bones, Augusta Longbottom, Lucius Malfoy and Andromeda Tonks. He hasn't even read them yet.

"Professor-"

"Stay behind after class please, Mr Potter." McGonagall speaks cleanly, and she replaces the letter on the pile; a few of the Hufflepuffs ooh, and Harry makes a mental note to tell Ernie MacMillan where to shove it the next time he asks Harry how to perform a polishing charm " Slytherin, it seems, is the only house that teaches basic application of household charms.

He crosses his arms over his chest as he stands in front of her desk after class " this is just great. Snape hates him, and now McGonagall is going to victimize him too, as if he needs this.

"It's not against the school rules to send and receive letters, Professor," Harry says as soon as the last Hufflepuff has reluctantly filtered out of the room.

"Mr Potter, why are you writing letters to these people?"

"With respect, Professor, that's none of your business."

McGonagall takes the letter from Mrs Longbottom, opening it to the second page, and Harry notices something he hadn't when he'd opened it from the envelope " a photograph pinned to the front, marked 1978 on the back. He puts out his hand immediately, and she presses it to his fingers: an older couple, labelled Frank and Alice, with a man Harry recognizes as well as his own reflection.

The photograph moves, and Harry sees the woman " Alice " repeatedly lean away, laughing, as his father shoves Frank in the chest, the motion repeated every few seconds as the photograph loops back. His chest aches to look at it, to see his own father laughing " he's so young, how old must he be? 18? 19?

Two years before Harry was born " how old would he be now? In his thirties?

"That's my dad. I do look like him." He whispers the words, and he's surprised to hear his own voice come out thickly.

"Yes, James and Lily knew the Longbottoms quite well. They were a few years above them at school."

McGonagall is looking at him with an oddly pinched expression on her

face, and Harry can see her eyes are shining slightly. She breathes in, and then she says,

"Potter, your father was one of my Gryffindors. I taught him while he was at school. I quite understand if you are reaching out, hoping to find more information about he and your mother. You are- welcome in my office, if you wish to talk about them."

Harry stares at McGonagall, just for a few seconds, and then he says, in a very small voice, slightly surprised, "Thank you, Ma'am."

McGonagall gives a curt nod, and Harry moves towards the door, but then he turns back, hesitating for a second before asking, "What did my mum look like?"

She frowns. "Didn't you live with your mother's sister, Petunia?"

Harry debates it, for a second â€" it's embarrassing, to talk about his aunt and uncle, but on the other, he might not get sent back there if people know how horrible they are. "I was never allowed to talk about my parents, Ma'am. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon said they were freaks who died in a car crash. I never knew what either of them looked like."

He watches lines tighten in McGonagall's face, watches the furious red that had come about when he'd insulted her last week come to her cheeks. Maybe he won't have to go back to the Dursleys in the summer after all.

"She was a short girl, not much taller than you. Beautiful red hair down to her shoulders, green eyes just like yours. She was ever so pretty â€" James was infatuated with her even at your age." Harry smiles a little, giving a slow nod, and McGonagall watches him with a sad expression on her face, but she doesn't look angry at all now.

* * *

><p>Harry whispers Extinguo from where he crouches against the next staircase, watching the lamps either side of the Fat Lady dim a little, and then he really carefully moves down as she lets out a loud noise of complaint.<p>

He hears the girls walk up the stairs â€" all three of them are chasers on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and he's seen them zoom about at practice under the command of Oliver Wood.

"Caput Draconis!" One of them, a strikingly beautiful girl Harry knows is named Angelina, gives the password cleanly, and Harry smirks. He knows where all the common rooms are, now â€" the Hufflepuffs are by the kitchens, the Ravenclaws are up in another tower, and the Gryffindors are behind the Fat Lady: most importantly, of course, he now knows the password.

"Your torches are looking a bit dim, Ma'am." Harry speaks politely as he looks up at the Fat Lady, having casually walked down the stairs he'd been hidden on while she'd been looking the other way, and she huffs at him, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You should go down to the dungeons, child, where you belong."

"I just wanted you to know, if you'd like me to fix them before I do."

Harry holds up the box of matches he uses for Potions class, and her frown falters a little as she shifts in her painted seat.

"Very well. I'd be grateful." She lifts her chin, looking down at him with an aristocratic arrogance, and Harry stands on his very tip-toes to set the match against the torches and get them flaming properly again. With that, he flicks the match through the air to extinguish it again.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. And- Ma'am?"

"Yes, child?"

"Caput Draconis."

"You sneaky little-"

The rest of her insult is cut off as she swings backwards, and Harry neatly steps into the common room, walking directly up to another member of the Quidditch team and tapping him on the shoulder. No one really glances his way, and Wood looks completely surprised as he turns his head and stares at Harry.

"Excuse me? Captain Wood?"

"Who- what in the Hell are you doing in he-"

"I just want to talk. It's about Quidditch."

Wood grabs him by the back of the robes and begins to haul Harry out onto the grand staircase again, infuriated by the way he grins up at the older man. Wood scowls at him.

"How did you-"

"I want you to teach me how to play Quidditch."

"Ask Flint." Harry laughs, making Wood look started.

"Flint will want me on the team. I don't want to be on the team. You don't want me on the team." Wood stares at him, his thick brow furrowing. He's a burly lad, broad and well-built, but Harry isn't intimidated â€" he can see the catch in the boy's face; he's heard Marcus Flint talk about how passionate Wood is about Quidditch. Harry is intent on banking on that obsession.

"Why don't you want to be on the team?" Wood asks, as if he's asking why Harry doesn't want to keep breathing. Harry shrugs his shoulders. Quidditch looks like a fun game, but the boys on the Quidditch team are built like giants, and he's seen the way the Bludgers whistle through the air at practice. Even if he'd be unlikely to die, one of those things would probably hurt.

"Why don't I want you on the team?"

"Madam Hooch says I fly like a demon." Wood crosses his arms over his chest.

"Talk, snake."

"You take Hermione and Neville aside, under guise of giving them extra lessons. I join in because we're friends. You teach me the rules, and I don't join the team. You don't narrow your chance at the cup even further."

"Why?" Harry grins.

"Does it matter?"

"I want this in writing." Harry shrugs.

"Okay." Wood scowls, just a second more, and then he puts out his broad hand: Harry shakes it, offering a grin in return. He then says,

"This is secret, though. I came up here to ask about my crush on Angelina if anyone asks."

"You have a crush on Angelina?" Wood asks, stumped, and Harry frowns at him. Angelina is pretty, but-

"Wood. I'm eleven."

"Right, right. Well. See you, Potter. Granger will let you know."

* * *

><p>"Hello, Hermione," Harry says reasonably as she storms over to the Slytherin table, and he smiles at her pleasantly, looking up from his conversation with the Bloody Baron " they're sat together towards the end of the table. He'd wanted to ask the man a few questions for his History of Magic homework and, for reasons Harry quite understands as he considers the silver bloodstains down the Baron's robe, no one had much wanted to sit with them.<p>

"I thought you weren't speaking to me."

"I'm not doing it! I won't do it."

"It'll help you be more comfortable on a broom," Harry points out.

"I don't want to be comfortable on a broom!"

"You want to be uncomfortable?" The Baron speaks in a scathing, rasping tone, but Hermione, to her credit, is a bit too angry of Harry to be scared of Slytherin's bloodied house ghost.

"I don't want to be on a broom at all, thank you very much!" The Baron looks surprised, arching his eyebrows and leaning back slightly, and Hermione turns back to Harry.

"What about Neville? Neville's gran would probably be really happy

with him if he could ride a broom properly."

Hermione crosses her arms over her chest. "It's just for Neville."

"Just for Neville, totally." Harry grins at her, and after an exasperated huff, she offers a slight smile.

"You're an idiot."

"Lucky I've got you then, isn't it?"

7. Year One: Holiday Excitement

The first Quidditch match of the year is the day after Harry's first lesson with Wood, and subsequently he views it with far more knowledge than he would have â€" it's an exciting game, Harry thinks as he watches the blobs of green and red shuttle past each other â€" as Seeker, bizarrely, is Gryffindor's fifth year prefect, Percy Weasley.

He's surprisingly good on a broom, and given how uptight he is, Harry had never expected him to be so flexible, but he moves easily with the wind and dodges the Bludgers sent his way by the Slytherin team.

"I didn't know your Weasley could fly!" Harry says, impressed.

"He's not my Weasley, Harry," Hermione retorts disapprovingly, and Harry laughs â€" she spends a bit of time with the boy, as he's often very willing to help her with her homework, and Harry does like him. Officious, certainly, and surprisingly easy to fluster given how authoritative he tries to be, but he's decent.

Better than Ronald.

"And the Weasleys all play Quidditch together at home," Hermione supplies. "They've got a little pitch out by their house."

"Mrs Weasley never mentioned that! With Bill and Charlie, then?"

"Must be."

Harry watches as Fred and George speed through the air together, hitting twin Bludgers away from their elder brother, and both of them pat him on the back as they speed off again. Percy, though, flighty as he is on a broom, just isn't as good as Terrence Higgs, the Slytherin Seeker, and he catches the Snitch. The scores end up with Gryffindor almost winning, with Slytherin only ten points ahead after the Snitch â€" Harry still can't quite comprehend that bit of the points system, but it doesn't matter.

"That was quite short."

"God." Hermione complains. "What, they're usually longer?"

"Hours longer, they can be."

"Ugh!"

Harry nudges her playfully, but Hermione just shakes her head as they both move to stand " they'd sat together on one of the stands unofficially designated to the Ravenclaws, wanting to settle on some neutral ground, and Padma Patil taps Harry's shoulder.

"You think you're gonna win this year, Harry?"

"Flint says Gryffindor's crippled without their old Seeker, Charlie. Dunno about the other teams though " is yours any good?"

"Not sure! Never been one for Quidditch, really," Padma says reasonably, and Harry does like her " the Ravenclaws are perfectly apathetic where house rivalry is concerned, mostly, and it's certainly easy to talk to her than one of the Gryffindor lads or worse, one of the Hufflepuffs.

Harry's looking at her when he notices the wood of the stand's wall crack behind her, and he grabs Padma by the front of her robes, shoving her backwards: she lets out a harsh scream, but her hand grasps at the bench behind her as the part of the stand he and Hermione is on begins to crack underneath them.

The floor of the stand's box, built as it is about twenty feet up, is beginning to segment beneath their feet, separating and sectioning off the corner the two of them are stood on. "Hermione, get over there!" Harry yells, and he grasps at the proffered hand of Penelope Clearwater, a Ravenclaw prefect, as she tries to pull he and Hermione back. Hermione scrambles onto a safer panel, but Harry's feet are, inexplicably, stuck to the wood underneath him as he tries to struggle to one of the intact floorboards, and he loses hold of Clearwater's hand as he begins to tumble backwards with the piece of wood under his trainers.

He closes his eyes tightly as he starts to fall down to the ground, feeling the air whistle past his ears as he gets that sickening falling sensation " he just keeps going, Merlin, how far up is he? He's going to die for sure-

"Arresto momentum!" Harry feels himself freeze in midair, and he cautiously opens one eye, seeing himself four feet above the ground " everyone is ridiculously silent as they all look at him, and Harry, weakly, with a glance at Professor Snape, says,

"Alright, sir?"

"Anything broken, Potter?" Snape asks, looking at him in the same impassive, slightly hateful manner he always does.

"Just my fall, sir." Perhaps an inappropriate answer to such a brusque question: Snape stares at him, and looks like he's resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

"Finite incantatem," Snape says, and Harry drops unceremoniously onto the ground. He gets to his feet, and a cheer erupts through the stands, Harry looks to Snape, and he claps himself, enjoying the way his Head of House's scowl deepens. He storms off, and Harry's left laughing a little giddily as Hermione rushes over to him, grabbing him by the arm to look at his face.

"What happened? I know you took Penny Clearwater's hand, but-"

"My feet were stuck to the floor! I dunno, someone must've jinxed me-" Harry says, shaking his head as he looks up to the splintered stands, where Padma Patil is still sat down, breathing heavily and holding tightly to the bench underneath her. Harry gives her a little wave, and she returns it awkwardly, nodding her head. If he hadn't pushed her back, she'd have fallen straight through the gap in the stand.

"Potter! Are you alright!?"

"Oh, Madam Pomfrey, I'm fine â€" Professor Snape caught me before â€" okay, I'm going with you, aren't I? See you later, Hermione!"

He resigns himself to it, and lets Madam Pomfrey drag him aside for a few diagnostic spells. He likes her, though, and manages a crack or two asking if this is how Quidditch matches always go, but she doesn't find that funny at all.

* * *

><p>Harry is in a good mood as he walks down to the dungeons â€" it's only a few days before the Christmas holidays start, and he's just had his third session with Oliver Wood, Neville and Hermione. The Weasley twins had even been kind enough to lend their brooms to Neville and Hermione (Harry suspects this kindness will come with a later price for Harry to pay, but he's okay with that, as Neville and Hermione had been far more confident on brooms that didn't shake ominously with their weights). And Harry is actually quite confident of Quidditch, too â€" Oliver had let him have a go at catching a snitch, and after seeing the way he'd bulleted after the thing on Oliver's Comet 260, lithe body moulded to the wood, he had whistled and remarked he was very glad of their deal.<p>

The last few days have been uneventful â€" they'd had a few conversations over dinner about what had happened with the stands, but Dumbledore had insisted it must have been an accident and that the protective warding on the wood had been lost. Draco had grimly said that his father had recommended the school's temporary wardmaster himself, and that she'd never be so STUPID as to put iffy wards in place.

"Means someone's trying to kill you then, Potter." Blaise had said unconcernedly, and around his glass of pumpkin juice, Harry had given a casual nod.

"Seems that way. Bit how I started out, really, isn't it?" Draco had sniggered at that, and Harry had remained in a good mood despite the somewhat unsettling idea.

"Potter."

"Professor Snape, sir?" Wordlessly, the dour Potions Master holds out a sheet of paper on a clipboard: a list of the Slytherins who'll be staying during the holidays. The list is upsettingly short, but Harry takes it anyway, scrawling his name on the sheet. "Thank you, sir." He speaks politely, but Snape's scowl does not budge.

"How'd you know I'd be staying?" Professor Snape walks past him, and Harry honestly wonders why he bothered. Much as Snape had saved Harry's life, he remains as sadistic as ever in Potions â€" subsequently, it's Harry's best subject, as he has to make so much effort to avoid getting the Ts Snape so obviously enjoys giving him. He makes his way down the corridor and towards his office, and, with an exasperated huff of a sigh, Harry steps into the Slytherin common room.

He has letters to work on tonight â€" a dozen of them, and he wants to send them off by tonight, before the sun goes down.

"I don't get why you do it." Nott says with an unsympathetic shake of his head as he looks at the stack of three already-written letters on his desk, and the waiting, blank papers that are still to be written.

"I'm well-connected, Theodore. What can I say?"

"They only write you back because you're the Boy Who Lived." Draco says, pretending he isn't as green as his robe crest. Of course, as the scion of the Malfoy line, they'd all probably write him back too, but he hasn't so much as tried.

"So? The important thing is that they write me back." Harry knows full well this is the reason some of them write him back, but it's not the only reason â€" he has three photographs of his parents pinned to the wall beside his bed, now, in amongst photos of all sorts of people â€" Harry's paternal grandparents, some aunts, some uncles, even a few cousins. They're all dead now, of course: they'd been killed in the war for being on the wrong side, and now Harry is firmly an orphan.

It doesn't feel so bad, though, with all the stories some of them are telling him â€" Augusta Longbottom's son had been friends with his dad, and she'd gone to school with Harry's grandmother, who'd apparently been a devil at wizarding poker, even at Harry's age.

He'd never known anything about his dad's side of the family at all, except that the Dursleys despised them, but knowing that there were so many good wizards? Light wizards, war heroes?

It's a nice thought, and he smiles a little as he glances to the wall â€" the photographs he has are all scattered against the wall where he'd stuck them with Spellotape, and beside them is a big piece of parchment he'd started drawing his family tree on. Loads of people knew his mum, but apart from knowing her parents were Muggles, no seemed to know much more about them.

Harry doubts he'll want to ask Aunt Petunia much about it â€" she doesn't even have any photographs of them up.

Harry has a good thirty five people on his list now, and it's nice to have people who'll answer his questions about his house and his family and his wand â€" Mrs Longbottom even HAD given him some help on his Transfiguration homework, and he'd managed to turn a match into a needle in his lesson recently.

For tonight it's letters to Molly Weasley (Harry's primary penpal,

who tells him everything from charms to fix a scraped knee to how to point a brick wall), a journalist at the Daily Prophet named Yolanda Hartbrook, Florean Fortescue, Gideon Flourish (no relation), Lucius Malfoy (he likes to hear about Draco, mostly, but he dispenses hair tips, as well), Mr Ollivander (Harry had wanted to know some more about his wand, and he'd been ecstatic to comply) and a few others: at the bottom are a few owl order forms to order gifts for Draco and the other boys, as well as for Hermione, Hagrid and Neville.

"Alright, Harry?" Hagrid greets him merrily as Harry begins to walk down to the owlery, and Harry grins at him.

"Alright, Hagrid?" Hagrid has long since overcome his issue with Harry's housing (at least where it concerns Harry himself, though he's very cautious over his fellow snakes), and Harry's even been down to tea with him the once, with Hermione.

"Come down for a cuppa before you head up the castle for yer tea, alright'? I got summat to show ya!"

"Will do!" Hagrid's show-and-tell, it turns out, is a book about magical creatures, and Harry takes it readily, beaming at the other man. "'Cause ye've been askin' about magical stuff an' that-"

Harry throws himself forwards and, as best as he can given Hagrid's tremendous height and bodily girth, hugs him tightly: Hagrid grins down at him, patting his back ever-so-gently with one massive hand. The book is battered, and Harry guesses secondhand from the village, but it's a sort of bestiary, and it looks much more affectionate than *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*, its title, written in fading silver script, is simple: *Living Wonders of the Magical World*.

Harry takes it with him to dinner, though he knows to sit on it and not to try reading it at the table: Afifa had cuffed him hard upside the head when he'd done that the once — strict dining etiquette is to be observed at evening meals, without exception.

"Who's staying over the holidays, then?" Afifa speaks with authority (Harry has never known her to speak without authority).

"Me," Harry says, and the only other person to say yes is a rather sad looking fourth year. Cheerful, really.

"You two are just stuck with me, then."

"Aren't you going home?"

"My parents are refurbishing the shop. If I go home, I'll have to help," she points out, and Harry nods his understanding.

"Sneaky." Afifa winks at him, and Harry grins, turning back to his food.

Christmas time, Harry discovers as the days go on, is a very colourful affair at Hogwarts. There are twelve massive trees in the hall, all decorated, and Flitwick was delighted to teach Harry a charm for making baubles when he asked if he could help. It was surprisingly cathartic, actually, hanging them regularly along the tree, and Flitwick had given him three points to Slytherin for his

technique.

Harry suspects he actually earned the ten points for cutting Flitwick's decorating time in half, but he didn't point this out, and instead thanked the Charms professor with a smile.

A tree had also been settled in the middle of each of the Slytherin dorm rooms, as Harry was delighted to discover when he went to the common room that evening. It had been put in the very centre of his and Draco's imaginary line, back against the wall.

Each of the dorms, Harry has discovered, are the same, and all of them are usually kept symmetrical; his and Draco's beds are in opposite corners, furthest away from the door, with their trunks set at their foot like ottomans. Directly across from each of their beds is a wardrobe, and beside the beds, small mahogany tables with drawers for cards and assorted things.

The tree, now put well into place, sits between their beds, but it is very bare, but for a silver envelope neatly set into the branches.

"What, are we meant to decorate them ourselves?"

Draco complains as he comes in behind Harry, and Harry reaches out, taking the envelope and reading the note within aloud.

First years are expected to decorate their own trees

in order that they learn appropriate methods and

charms for use in later life. A prize will be given

for the best tree.

Following is a list of three or four charms â€" one Harry recognizes for tinsel (Argentum Lux), and another for glitter (Caelum Micat), but the other he doesn't recognize.

"What's stellaris in Latin?" he asks, and Draco reaches for the Latin dictionary on his bedside, encouraged for independent study, glancing through.

"Stella is star. It's probably for the top of the tree." They set out together, starting with the tinsel. Draco puts the star on the tree as Harry says "Cruso!" and begins to set baubles (which aren't actually baubles like Aunt Petunia had, ceramic or plastic, but silver, shining balls that are warm to the touch and wriggle if you poke them) on to compliment the black tinsel.

"Oh, splendid!"

"Flitwick showed me." Draco nods, and he notes the incantation down in the spell journal on his bedside table â€" Draco had a habit of writing almost everything down in diaries, and Harry suspects, based on the methodical way Mr Malfoy writes his letters, that his father does the same thing.

Harry stands back, then, and they grin together at the tree. It does look good, but it's missing something â€" it looks a little too

orderly to Harry, too much like the picture perfect trees Aunt Petunia had always decorated, and he wants to add to it. "Have you got any green ink?"

Giving him a perplexed and curious look, Draco retrieves a bottle, and Harry hands him a piece of parchment as he begins to cut another with a knife, instructing him to brush over the parchment until it's green.

"What we do, is we take fat bits of parchment like this, and fold them into sort of ovals with the flat bits together, yeah, and then stick them with Spellotape so it's green, white, green white..."

Draco hums thoughtfully, and by the time they're done both of their hands are COVERED in green ink, but they have five of them: fat little paper flowers that hang from the tree on twine. "Where'd you learn that?" Draco asks curiously, though he seems impressed enough as they walk down to the bathroom to wash their hands. He's not nearly so rude now â€" Harry suspects because it's not so easy to be a pillock when you share a room with the victim.

"Muggle primary school." Harry speaks with confidence. "At Christmas they teach all sorts of crafty stuff."

Draco hesitates, lips pressing together: Harry is pretty sure of his internal dilemma. On one hand, it's Muggle stuff, but on the other, he likes the decorations. "D'you know any others?"

"A few..." He's intentionally evasive, for now, but he'll tell Draco how to make paper angels before he goes home for the holiday â€" Malfoy will like that. "Oh, wow. Frank, we've a winner."

It's not Afifa, but a thin, beautiful seventh year boy that calls down the hall: his voice is mellifluous, and Harry beams at him as Francois and the other prefects all gather at Harry and Draco's door, the other first years pushing under their arms to get a look.

"Oh, those charms weren't on the sheet!" comes Pansy Parkinson's shrill complaint, but the handsome boy just tuts at her.

"Now now, Parkinson: we were rewarding you for creativity, not for reading."

"What's the charm for those paper things, Malfoy?"

"Oh, they weren't magic," Harry supplies. "Just paper, ink and Spellotape."

There's laughter amongst the prefect judges, but it isn't unpleasant â€" they all look very pleased, and Harry and Draco are rewarded with wrapped gifts. They turn out to be green, flannel dressing gowns decorated with snakes, and Harry laughs with delight, trying his on immediately.

"Oh, they move!"

"Course they do." Draco tuts at him as if it's obvious, but even he is grinning at his Christmas prize - he's very proud, Harry thinks, and it's something to tell his mum and dad about when he gets off at

the platform.

"Merry Christmas, Potter!" Draco says with fake bile in his voice as he runs down towards the entrance hall, and Harry waves him off, grinning as he returns the sentiment.

"Merry Christmas, Malfoy! See you in January!"

Even with the joking, though, he's a little sad to see the other boy go — it's weird, sleeping in his dormitory with no one else across from him, but it can't be helped, he supposes. Hermione and Neville have gone home for the holidays as well — the only friends Harry has around (if "friend" can be used so loosely) are the Weasley twins.

Shame, really. He almost thought Christmas would be a little less lonely this year.

8. Year One: Suspicions and Surprises

Harry is quietly pensive as he settles in the common room, curled up in one of the high-backed, winged armchairs by the fire. It's actually quite cool in the Slytherin common room, as a rule — the dorms are enchanted, he thinks, to be pleasantly toasty, but the corridors and the common room are warmed only by the fireplaces, and he, Afifa and Gerald Philips (the sad fourth year) are all in the same place.

He thinks about a dozen things — who had destroyed the Ravenclaw stands and why, what that grubby little package from the Gringotts vault was, why it must be stored on the third floor corridor, when lunch is—

"What time is it?"

"Twenty past ten. Lunch is at twelve thirty," Harry huffs. For Christmas Eve in a magical school, nothing much is happening. He's bored.

"No homework?"

"Done it." Afifa looks up from her book, and regards him with obvious amusement on her regal features.

"It's three days into the holiday."

"Everyone's gone home," Harry supplies by way of explanation, and Afifa laughs at him; it's strange, really, that she can look so smug and superior even while laughing. She then says,

"Right, you know where the Hufflepuff common room is?"

"It's by the kitchens," Harry supplies automatically.

"Have you been into the kitchens?" Harry shakes his head, and Afifa nods her own. "You know that painting with all the fruit? Go up to it and tickle the pear."

"Tickle it?" Harry repeats sceptically, and Afifa nods her head.

Harry doesn't need telling a third time â€" he's bored, and he really does want something to do. He grabs at his wand and pulls on his boots, and then he moves down the corridor, Slytherin scarf thrown around his neck to stave off the even icier cool of the dungeons as a whole.

He finds the painting, and he peers at it, interested. He then reaches out and tickles the pear â€" it giggles, wriggling under his finger on the canvas, and then it morphs into a door knob of the same speckled green. Harry grins at it, and he turns the handle, peering cautiously inside.

The room is huge. The ceiling is obscenely high, and Harry steps inside, he notes the five large tables â€" the room looks about the same as the Great Hall, and all the tables are identical as well, with the four houses and the staff table at the top. He's fascinated as he peers around, looking at all the stovetops and counters around the edges of the room and, wearing what appeared to be teatowels, dozens and dozens of weird little people.

"A student!" comes an excited whisper, and a few of them rush forwards, ushering Harry to sit on a little stool directly in front of the fire: there are hundreds of them, there must be, and each of them has leathery skin and big, wide ears and eyes. Harry sits down, obediently, and he peers at them.

They peer back.

"Is there something sir needs, sir?" One little person talks in a high, squeaky voice, and Harry replies, a little awkwardly,

"Er- one of my prefects sent me here. 'Cause I was bored. This is the kitchens, right?"

"This is being the Hogwarts kitchens, sir!"

"And we is the Hogwarts house elves, sir!"

"Oh, you guys are house elves!" Recognition passes across Harry's features as he looks at the little wrinkly people, taking in the way they're, er, dressed. Sort of. His book had detailed what house elves were, but there had been no pictures and he'd not made the connection â€" they were all ever so small. Sensing his apparent excitement, there are titters amongst the elves that linger with him â€" about a half dozen or so â€" as the others go off to continue working.

"Are those your uniforms, then?" he asks; he'd read that house elves didn't wear clothes, and that giving them clothes was a way to dismiss them. Harry knows better than to talk about house elves with his house mates: a lot of them have them in their homes, and he's not entirely comfortable with the whole arrangement. Hogwarts has more house elves than anywhere else, though, and they all look well-treated.

"Yes, sir! These is being tea towels, sir, and they's very nice!" One of them gives a little twirl and shows off their tea towel, and Harry grins at them.

"Does sir want some food?"

"Or something to drink?"

Harry hesitates â€" Afifa had sent him, but he doesn't want to ruin his lunch. "Could I just have a cup of tea, please?"

The assent comes swiftly, and two of them bustle off, returning with a cup of tea and a digestive on the side of the saucer. Harry thanks them gratefully, and then he begins to ask questions, which one of the elves dutifully answers as the others go back to work: Hogwarts traditionally offers home to all sorts of elves, who are born into a Hogwarts line or who are dismissed from other places, and they make all the food and clean all the rooms.

Harry listens with fascination, and when it's time for him to go they all say goodbye excitedly and readily assure him he's welcome to come back â€" they've very nice, house elves. They're all so earnest and pleasant and nice.

"Oh, look at this, Forge!"

"I know, Gred: it's little Harry Potter!"

"I knew you two were dull, but I didn't realize you forgot your own names." Fred and George laugh as they lean against each other â€" Harry can't help but be glad, for a moment, that they're built more stockily than Percy is, as they're not nearly so tall as they could be. He's not really all that intimidated by the twins, but he imagines he'd be a bit more so, if they were tall.

"And what were you doing in the kitchens, hmm?"

"Prefect Lanjwani sent me."

"She the pretty Indian girl?" George asks, and Harry arches an eyebrow.

"She's Pakistani."

"And what did she send you for?" Fred's smirk is disturbingly wide, and Harry glances between him and George, who looks about as ready for mischief.

"I was bored."

"We could alleviate some of that boredom, Potter."

"We could. Maybe we could-"

"Play a little-"

"Game."

Ordinarily, Harry would just walk away, but he is bored. The twins are difficult to work out, most of the time, but they don't really aim any of their mischief at him, so he's just fine with them for the time being.

"Alright. But remember that I write your mum regularly."

"Ah, but-"

"And I wrote Charlie last week about dragons for History of Magic."

"You sneaky little sod," Fred says, voice full of admiration and, Harry suspects, a little bit of pride. Their parents are in Romania at the moment, visiting Charlie, who happens to be a dragon tamer â€" it's not true, of course. Harry's never sent a letter to Charlie Weasley in his life, but they don't know that, and Harry knows it's best to lie than to let Fred and George have free rein.

"I wish we'd got you," George says despairingly, shaking his head, and Harry grins at him. "The damage we could have done!" He and Fred share sighs and little, upset moues, and then Fred moves back to business.

"What sort of game?"

"Snap?" George suggests.

"Gobstones?"

"Chess?" Harry regards the both of them sceptically as they swap back and forth, but there's no point playing a normal game with the twins.

"You could take me up to your common room."

"Doesn't sound like much of a game."

"Slytherins really don't play games, do they, Gred?"

"The game would be sneaking me past your brothers." Fred and George share a look, and then they give each other twin smirks. He's got them interested now: Fred and George appreciate chaos, and Harry's all too happy to allow himself to be involved, if it'll get Ron and Percy's feathers in ruffles.

"That does sound like fun."

"But what's the prize?"

"If I get caught before lunch, I'll give you whatever." Fred and George raise their eyebrows as one, and look pleased. Harry already owes them one favour, but that one's not official, and Harry's certain they like the idea of having a Slytherin in their debt, even if he's only a first year.

"And if we go down to lunch and no one's noticed?" Harry goes quiet for a few seconds, trying to think â€" what would he want that the Weasley twins have? They're third year, pranksters- He doesn't just want a list of spells, because he can get those anywhere.

"I want you to tell me three shortcuts â€" actual portrait passages or secret ways around school, not just quick ways to go." Fred and George share a thoughtful look, apparently considering the wager, and then they give a nod. They actually seem to really approve of his price, judging by the appraising expressions they exchange when they think Harry's not looking.

Harry folds the collar of his outer robe inward to hide the green lining and quickly combs his hair down, shoving his tie into his pocket and hanging his glasses on the inside of his inner robe. His vision's terrible, but he'll be able to make out the stuff closest to him if he squints. With that, he follows the twins upstairs, and they settle right by the fire, beginning to play Exploding Snap together.

Across the room, Percy Weasley concentrates on the book on his lap, and concentrates on that rather than the chess game he has between him and Ron. Ron is complaining, Harry can hear, about having no one else in the dorm with him, and Harry feels a pang of sympathy, feeling a twin loss with Draco gone home for the holidays, but he can't feel too sorry for him.

* * *

><p>"What sort of head boy are you going to be, Percival!?" Fred demands as George guffaws, grasping at his own belly and doubling over.<p>

"Ten points from Gryffindor, and five from Slytherin for being out of bounds!" Harry laughs at Percy's bright red face and ears as they walk down to the Great Hall – he'd nudged Percy in the side just as they'd stepped out of the portrait hole together, and Percy is now positively apoplectic as he realizes who the boy sat with his brothers had been.

"Here, Potter, we're sitting with the Ravenclaws - were you in the kitchens all that time?" Afifa asks.

"I was in the Gryffindor common room. Just won three secret portrait passwords for it, actually."

"Five points to Slytherin for creative thinking."

"Prefect Lanjwani!" snaps Percy Weasley furiously, and he glares at her, positively purple with rage, and Harry has to stifle a laugh against his sleeve.

"I just took those points off him!"

"And?" Afifa's tone is icy, her gaze even icier. Afifa and Percy stand head to head, Percy only a little bit taller than she is, Percy flustered and red in the face and stuttering, and Afifa with an impassive expression on her pretty face. And with that, he turns and stomps to the Gryffindor table, leaving Harry to sit down and look pleased with himself.

Poor Percy: he almost feels bad.

Lunch is a tremendously good affair – Harry isn't fond of roasted meat, as it's a little too similar to the meals at the Dursleys, but there's all sorts of stuff to eat at the table, and he ends up settling with a festively decorated chicken pie. Magical Christmas crackers are tremendous as well – he ends up with a wizarding chess set, a green bonnet and some snake cufflinks he swapped from a Ravenclaw for a book of Christmas poetry.

The rest of the day is uneventful, really, and by the time Harry goes

to bed he's exhausted, and sleeps very well.

Of course, when he wakes up, it's a little sluggishly, and he sleepily moves to get dressed. It's only once he is dressed and he's rifling through his trunk for a book that he looks up.

"Merlin's BEARD, Potter. You're popular!"

"Afifa?" She points to the heap of what must be three dozen packages packed in front of his tree, and Harry stares, his green eyes wide behind the glass of his spectacles.

"Oh my God. Are they all for me!?" He hadn't noticed them. He hadn't even looked at the tree, it hadn't even occurred to him that there'd be anything there except whatever Hermione and his house mates had given him.

"Well, they're not for Salazar Slytherin, are they? Leave them, for now â€" we've got breakfast."

And Harry does follow her down, but not before counting the packages and realizing, with a mix of grim satisfaction and a bit of guilt (what ever had he done to deserve all that?) that he has thirty nine presents under the tree.

He'll have to make sure to let Dudley know.

9. Year One: Tempting Fate

Breakfast is not so extravagant an affair, but this simplicity came with the promise that later on Christmas lunch and the Christmas dinner would be far more exciting; once more, the three had been settled on the Ravenclaw table with the lingering Ravenclaws.

Harry remains quietly thoughtful as he eats his bacon and eggs, utterly thrown, and when he settles back down in his dormitory, he closes the door, setting about unwrapping each of the gifts he'd been sent. He selects, to begin with, a parcel that is neatly wrapped, but with creased paper and old twine: it turns out, to Harry's surprise, to be from Molly Weasley.

He stares at the contents as he removes them: a thick, green jumper he's certain she must have knitted herself (he didn't even know wizards wore jumpers â€" most of the time people seemed to just enchant their robes!), and folded inside, a box of home-made fudge. He smiles a little, immediately pulling it on over his head, and sets to the rest.

The first few make sense â€" various sweets from the other boys in his year, a book about magical political systems from Hermione, a hand-carved flute from Hagrid, a box of candies from Dracoâ€" And then the others just astonish him.

It seems like most of the people he sends letters to has sent him one gift or other, and he can't even believe how generous it all is: Augusta Longbottom had sent him a book of Jinxes & Hexes to Shock and Stop, Dedalus Diggle had sent him a Wizard's Guide to Stylish Hats, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy had sent him, bizarrely, a candlestick holder, but when he sets it on his bedside table with a candle inside

it the silver coils around its base with a soft hiss. It is a snake, Harry realizes, that holds the base of the candle in its mouth, and apparently Vanishes the falling wax as time goes on.

Everyone had sent him things, and Harry feels ridiculously grateful and lucky as he sets the pairs of gloves and hats and scarves he'd received on top of his trunk, the books stacked on his bedside table, and the blanket from Andromeda Tonks folded on his bed. He realizes, as he smiles to himself, that he'd missed just one " a smaller, thinner package. There's barely any weight to it as he picks it up, and he peers at the note with curiosity. The looping handwriting isn't familiar to him, and he frowns at it.

Your father left this in my possession before he died.

Use it well.

He pulls out the package's contents, and the fabric feels wonderful between his fingers, with so little weight to it, tremendously soft against his skin: he throws it over his shoulders, seeing how the cloak falls, and is shocked to realize when he looks down that he can't see himself.

An invisibility cloak " someone had given him an invisibility cloak, that belonged to his father? He folds it immediately and puts it neatly into the bottom of his wardrobe to hide out of the way; with that he opens the door and moves into the common room.

"That looks warm." Afifa comments lightly, regarding the jumper, but then she advises, "I'd not let Professor Snape see you in it."

"He won't approve?"

"Like as not. Who sent you all those gifts, then?"

"The people I send letters to, mostly. Then my friends, and my Aunt and Uncle." Harry mentions the last two with a roll of his eyes and a disapproving tone to his voice, and Afifa frowns a little, tilting her head.

"What did they send you?"

"A fifty pence piece." She blinks at him, perplexed, and he reaches into his pocket, pulling out the silver coin. She peers at it, utterly befuddled by its shape, size and colour, and then she asks,

"How much is that in real money?" Trying not to laugh at the likely sour expression his Uncle Vernon would take on at hearing someone refer to wizarding currency as "real money", he answers,

"Not much. I'm not sure about how it'd transfer, but that might buy me a really small chocolate bar and nothing else." Afifa snorts, amused, and hands it back.

"What else, then?"

"Oh, God, loads of stuff. I didn't mean for anyone to send me anything!"

"That's what you get for sending letters, Potter," Afifa says, not at all disapproving " she's actually smiling a little, and it seems like she's really happy that Harry's done so well with gifts. "Make sure you send thank-you notes."

"I'm starting them now." And Harry does: that's what he does until lunch, neatly penning small letters with excited words of gratitude followed by apologies for not reciprocating: he can't believe it. He's never had real gifts at Christmas, and having so many is just bizarre. He's in such a good mood that he forgets to remove the jumper before going up to the great hall, and Snape stares at him when he enters, black eyes boring holes in Harry's confidence.

"Sir?"

"You match the Weasleys, Potter." Snape speaks grimly, and he points, irritation plain on his face, at the Weasley boys: Fred and George's bright orange jumpers are emblazoned with an F and a G, though Ron's and Percy's are plain like Harry's own.

"Mrs Weasley sent it, sir."

"I surmised."

"I could ask her to make one for you next year, sir. She could knit a black one." Snape purses his lips, and Harry offers him a hopeful smile. Without saying anything more, Snape pushes him to enter the hall without so much as taking a point off him " perhaps Christmas had put him in a good mood. He reconsiders this estimation when Dumbledore makes him pull a cracker, and Snape's response to winning a bright pink bonnet is to scowl and push it into Flitwick's lap.

Still, though, the rest of the day passes very quickly, and when Harry finally retires to his dorm for the night, he's in a spectacularly good mood. He's not especially tired, though, and he looks to his trunk, considering the invisibility cloak he'd received, the one he'd not told Afifa Lanjani about.

He could go up to the Third Floor, just to see. Hermione had taught him an unlocking charm, and he could-

Closing his curtains and blowing out his new candle to make it seem like he'd gone to bed, Harry pulls out his the cloak and puts it on. It dwarfs him a little, given that he's so short, but it doesn't matter so much when you can't see it once it's on: he creeps into the Slytherin common room and, after glancing around and seeing neither Afifa nor the sad Slytherin boy are about, he whispers the password (tinselitis) he's certain Snape didn't pick, and steps out into the draughty corridor.

The cloak hides him, but it doesn't mask the sound of his footsteps, and it's too cold for Harry to walk without boots, so he moves slowly and tries not to step too loudly. He makes his way up the stairs, and then to the third floor: the big hall of stairs is dark, all the lamps having been dimmed for the evening, but he still feels like all the portraits on the walls are staring down at him through their closed eyelids.

"Alohomora," he whispers, and he hears the click of the lock: it sounds obscenely loud, but none of the portraits so much as stir from where they're mostly sleeping in their frames. With that, he reaches out of the cloak and turns the thick, heavy handle, pushing open the door and peering inside.

He stares, mouth open, eyes wide. Directly in front of him, big, brown eyes glaring at him, are three- no, a three-headed, dog. The Cerberus, which had been one of the animals in the book Hagrid had given him a few weeks ago, is huge, and it sniffs the air as it star-

But it can't be staring at him. He's invisible.

Harry doesn't step into the room, not wanting to tempt fate as to whether it'll smell him or hear him, and he looks around " the Cerberus is alone, but its huge paws are on top of a large, oak trapdoor in the stone floor, and Harry makes a note of this.

The grubby package's contents must be underneath it. Harry pulls the door closed, and flinches when he hears a sharp,

"Who's there!?" Oh, God. Snape. Black robes billowing, he begins to make his way down the stairs from the sixth floor, and Harry moves as fast as he can onto a moving staircase, letting it carry him across the way. He watches Snape with horror as he bullets down the stairs, moving with supernatural speed.

Harry runs out into the fourth floor's corridors, and he hisses, desperately, "I like your spinning!" to a portrait of a woman at a spindle, throwing himself into the passage as she opens up. It leads right down to the ground floor, Harry knows " it's the best of the three passages Fred and George had given him " and he moves as swiftly as he can.

He doesn't breathe again until he's safe in his bed, and he breathes heavily as he folds up the cloak and puts it away.

It wouldn't have been worth seeing a dragon if it meant Snape catching him out of bounds at night.

10. Year One: New Discoveries

"And that's between Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel!"

Hermione and Harry share a significant look, and Hagrid turns bright pink immediately, looking between the both of them with horror on his features.

"Hey, now, hey now-" he begins to protest, but it's much, much too late: they'd just come down to chat to Hagrid, and hadn't really hoped to get any information about anything when Harry had asked about Fluffy, and honestly, what kind of name is that for a three-headed dog? But Hagrid had gotten all too flustered, and now they have a name to look for.

"See you later, Hagrid!"

"Have a nice day!"

"OI! Don't you two-" Harry realizes that Hagrid sighs rather than looking back to see it. He and Hermione had gone down to see him for her very first day back, after Harry had filled her in on his cloak, the Cerberus AND nearly being caught by Snape. There's still two or three days left of the holiday, of course, and they have time to research.

"Nicholas Flamel. Sounds familiar."

"It does to me as well. Any ideas?" Hermione shakes her head, and Harry hums, thoughtful.

"I'll ask around." Hermione gives him a sideways glance, seeming surprised.

"What, with the Slytherins? Harry-"

"With my housemates. And it's not like asking a teacher: they won't get suspicious."

"Who you won't tell about your cloak."

"I won't tell anybody about my cloak. Consider yourself lucky." Harry punctuates this comment with a flick to Hermione's nose, and she stares at him, indignation hilariously obvious on her face.

"Can't you keep your hands off the ugly shrew, Potter?" Pansy Parkinson grumbles as she walks past, pug-face scrunching up with the effort to talk.

"Leave speech to the more evolved of our species, Parkinson. We wouldn't want you to strain yourself," Hermione retorts. Harry laughs at Parkinson's irritated noise as she walks by, and he high-fives Hermione, grinning at her. It's nice to have her back â€" ridiculously nice, actually, and it's exciting to talk to her just after classes. It's weird, how he's gotten so used to having friends to talk to, when he never used to have them at all.

Harry's not stupid: he doesn't write off about Flamel in his letters â€" after all, whatever it is, it's being protected by a Cerberus for a reason, and there's no sense putting out a beacon if people don't realize it's at Hogwarts, and he doesn't want to ask a teacher, but students won't bat an eyelid at a weird question.

"Excuse me? Jakob?" Jakob Mikkelsen is a tall young man, elfin in appearance, pale, limby and ethereally beautiful, and he's a seventh year, ready to leave once his NEWTs are over. Most importantly, he's not a prefect, and doesn't really talk much to the prefects either.

"Potter?" Jakob Mikkelsen's voice is mellifluous and positively enchanting: he speaks, as he always speaks, as if each word is from some poem no one else has been notified he's reciting. For a second, taken over by the (presumably) genetic charm of the other boy, Harry forgets to speak, and then he remembers: "Um, I was reading one of the books I got sent for Christmas, and Nicholas Flamel came up in one of the references. What's he known for? I wanted to find some more on him in the library."

"He's an alchemist, Potter." Jakob's lilac eyes are clear, but his voice remains dreamy. Slender fingers reaching out to adjust Harry's tie, he offers a pleasant smile. Harry forgets to breathe. "We're studying him at the moment. He's the only known creator of the Philosopher's Stone."

"Oh."

"Potter?"

"Mmm?"

"Lungs." Harry heaves in a breath at the reminder, and Jakob shows his teeth as he grins, tapping the knot of his tie with an easy affection. "There. Off you go, now."

Harry stumbles a little as he walks into his dormitory, and he's still burning red as he sits down on the edge of his bed. Draco, Theo, Crabbe and Blaise are already in there, sat on Draco's with a set of cards between them, and regularly he hears the familiar bang and following hissing sound of a card snapping. Draco's lucky the house elves are so willing to repair his burnt bedsheets.

"You look bright," Blaise comments immediately, plump lips quirking into a smirk. He likes to see people blush.

"I talked to Jakob Mikkelsen," Harry admits.

"What on Earth did you do that for?" Blaise asks, evidently discomfited with the thought, and Draco tuts at him, shaking his head disapprovingly. Blaise raises his head in easy defiance: unlike Crabbe and his larger counterpart, who is yet to return to Hogwarts by Floo, he and Nott do not easily bow to Draco's whims and opinions.

"Is he a Veela?" Harry asks, thinking of the description he'd read in his Introduction to Wizarding Society, which had had a section on various non-human members of magical society â€" mostly part-Veela, vampires, hags and goblins.

"Veela are only female. Males with Veela heritage can't do the glamours." Draco speaks authoritatively, because he knows about Veela. Apparently his family are accused of being Veela all the time.

"No one knows that Jakob is, but he's some sort of half-breed."

"Elf," Crabbe grunts.

"Vincent, he's not gonna be a bloody elf, is he? The only elves we see are house elves, and house elves don't look like him." Theodore Nott sighs in a fraternally exasperated way, and Harry regards him with a slight fondness: Nott has several younger sisters at home, and subsequently he reacts to almost everything with boredom, vague responsibility and a sort of half-annoyed assistance.

It's actually really nice to have someone like him around.

He speaks with finality but not any particular authority; despite

this, everyone wordlessly accepts what Theo has said. That's generally the case.

"He's probably some sort of fae. Why'd you talk to him, anyway?"

"Just homework stuff." Theo snorts, as if homework wasn't a big enough issue to pay for by talking to Mikkelsen, and Harry sprawls on his bed, dropping his glasses aside and lying on the side. He watches the other boys play snap, and he lets his eyes droop a little: he only gets up properly when Draco pokes him in the cheek and orders "Dinner."

"Yes, sir." Harry says sarcastically, and pretends not to notice how pleased Draco is about it.

11. Year One: A Special Delivery

"Nicholas Flamel is an only known maker of the Philosopher's Stone," Harry supplies as he comes down to where Hermione is settled a little ways from the lake, dropping down next to her on the ground.

"Oh!" Hermione cries, recognition spreading across her features, her eyes going wide. "Oh, I've taken out a book for a little light reading, and it's got a bit on him, I think."

"They're studying him in alchemy," Harry says with a nod, and Hermione furrows her brow. She leans back, looking thoughtful for a few moments, and Harry adjusts his position on the grass, putting his hands behind his back on the ground. The grass had been a little damp, but Hermione had fixed that with a charm, and now they sit on the hill together, away from anyone who might want to eavesdrop.

"What does it do?" Harry asks after a short pause, realizing he has no idea.

"It's basically mythical," Hermione answers, staring out across the water. According to the older students, the giant squid often dances and slides lazily across the surface of the lake in the summers, but for now it's nowhere to be seen, and Harry doesn't mind. "It can turn any metal into gold, and from it you can make the elixir of life. It's why Flamel and his wife are both still alive â€" they must be at least six hundred by now."

Involuntarily and without being entirely certain why, Harry shivers, horrified at the idea â€" living for that long. It just sounds horrible. And gold? Well. That doesn't sound worth all the effort.

"And now the stone is here. But why?"

Harry flinches and lets out a hiss of noise, clutching at his scar as it gives a sudden flare of pain: God, why does it keep doing that? It must be the third or fourth time it's given a sudden sharp bite for no reason at all, and Harry can't figure out what each occasion has had in common. He'd thought it was Snape to start with, but with all the time he has with the Potions master glaring at him angrily, it doesn't happen every time.

"You really should look into curse scars, Harry," Hermione says quietly, almost reproachfully, and she looks at him with obvious concern on her face, and Harry shakes his head.

"I have, Hermione. I'm the only known survivor of the killing curse â€" no one has the same scar."

"But can't you write someone or something, or-?" Hermione's protest seems to be automatic, because she stops short and lets out a huff of a sigh. Harry shakes his head. He doesn't want to write about it in a letter, because the information feels wrong, or dangerous, somehow. It's not normal for his head to hurt like it does, he knows that, butâ€| "Who do you think wants the stone?"

"It could be anyone," Harry answers, grateful for the break in the momentary silence. "Unlimited life and money? Maybe it's Ron Weasley."

"You don't need to be so mean to him, Harry," Hermione says, and Harry stares at him.

"Me, mean to him?" Harry demands, still feeling the sting of the way Ron had snapped at him after his Sorting. "I don't even talk to him if I can help it. Why're you so keen to defend him for, anyway? He's awful to you."

"He's got some big shoes to fill. I don't think he's all bad." Harry opens his mouth to retort, but the yell behind him makes him turn.

"Oi! Harry!" Draco is running quickly down the hill from the castle, and Harry murmurs quickly to Hermione,

"Don't tell him about the stone."

"Isn't he your friend?" Hermione's voice takes on a slightly snooty tone at this, as she doesn't think Malfoy is worth being Harry's friend at all, but Harry doesn't call her out on it. He's not made any effort to reign in his bigotry, after all.

"Yeah, but he'll write his dad about it in a second. Don't."

Draco almost skids on the grass as he gets down to them, but he manages to steady himself â€" he has a good balance, Draco does. Harry suspects it has something to do with all the time he spends on a broom at home.

"Alright, Draco?" Harry asks lazily, leaning back on his hands and doing his best to look casual. Hermione's expression implies he is failing miserably to do so.

"Harry. Granger."

"If you're going to be rude, Draco, just go back up to the castle." Harry speaks before Hermione can get in an equally sharp response, and Draco stops short, mouth opening, eyes widening, slight pink darkening at the tops of his ivory cheeks. He doesn't like being told what to do, Harry knows â€" Draco's primary "friends" of choice are Crabbe and Goyle, and both of them are unimaginative, cruel and

completely dim. But they follow his orders, and Harry's not going to start doing that any time soon.

"An owl just dropped off some post for you, that's all. It's on your bed." Draco had hesitated for a moment, but when he speaks he even manages to look at Hermione as well as his house-mate. Harry frowns a little. He runs through the tally of letters he's sent most recently â€" no one should have really replied yet, and normally the owls drop in post in the morning or the evening with other owls.

"Where did it fly to?"

"It came in through one of the windows in the Viaduct and right down to the common room. Francis Drummond had to let the thing in," Draco says, doing his best not to sound as interested as he obviously is. After all, were he not as curious as Harry is about the thing, he'd not have run down the hill. Harry glances at Hermione, who is frowning in concentration as she looks at Malfoy.

"What sort of owl is it?" She asks. Malfoy hesitates, lip curling for a second, but he seems to think better of it.

"It's an eagle owl, like my father's. It's just a blue envelope, though, and I didn't pick it up to look at it, so I don't know about the seal," Draco answers, and Hermione tilts her head, seeming to consider this.

"You're not waiting on anything special, are you?"

"Well, no, not really. Everyone on my list has replied pretty recently, or they haven't got my letters yet, so I don't really seeâ€¦ I suppose this means I should get up," Harry finishes dispassionately, and Hermione rolls her eyes before jabbing him in the side with her elbow.

"Oi!"

"Just go and see what it is. It might be important."

"It might be a postal order form for Honeydukes in Hogsmeade," Harry points out.

"A postal order form an owl brought directly into the Slytherin common room to place on your bed?" Draco asks, sarcasm dripping from the aristocratic vowels, and Harry sighs.

"They might be half-price this week?" he offers half-heartedly, and Hermione shoves him. He pulls himself up off the grass, and despite himself he's aching to find out what it is â€" blue is a pretty standard colour, but suddenly his brain goes into overdrive as it formulates every possible shade the envelope could be, as if that'll give him more of a clue as to its contents.

"See you, Hermione. Potions in an hour or so, yeah?"

"Yes," Hermione says absently, her eyes focused on the book that had materialized in her lap as soon as Harry had gotten up.

"Partners?"

"Sounds good." He begins to make his way up the hill, bag slung over

his shoulder, and Draco walks beside him, waiting until Hermione is out of earshot before he drawls out something offensive.

"You needn't partner with her."

"I needn't," Harry says, "But I shall."

"But she's only a-" Draco cuts himself off when Harry looks at him, and then they walk in silence. Sharing a room together necessitates that Draco and Harry not completely despise each other, and when Draco's not being hateful, Harry actually quite likes him " he's posh and he's smug, but he's not actually as much like Dudley as he thought he'd been. Oh, he's spoilt and entitled, certainly, but he's helpful with homework, and unlike Dudley he actually does all his homework himself " and well, too. The only person ahead of him in Potions is Hermione, after all. In their Slytherin/Ravenclaw classes, he's sometimes top of the class.

Harry heads down the corridor, leaning and picking up the envelope from the bed: it's a soft, periwinkle blue, and the envelope looks expensive with paper lacing at the edge. Harry shifts his nail under the envelope's lip and drags it open with a quiet rip of parchment paper, shaking out the letter inside and dropping to sit back on the bed _with it._

Dear Mr Potter,

We have not previously corresponded, although I overheard Mrs Bones and Mrs Longbottom discussing your letters in the halls of the Ministry of Magic this Thursday past; discussing your apparent passion for your studies, they talked of books that might be recommended to you. My daughter has mentioned your appreciation of Magical History, and while its study is most certainly dry at Hogwarts, as a consequence of Professor Binns, the subject is a fascinating one.

The Hogwarts library is practical, but many of its books are antiquarian or out-dated in their arguments and layers of study: enclosed find a list of books and a modest voucher for their purchase at Flourish & Blotts.

Daphne's young friends have received such vouchers already, of course, as they were given them in preparation for the school year, but as you have been raised outside of magical society, it is no fault of yours that you have been deprived of her company previous to this year. Please, enjoy the books, and do pursue your studies with vigour.

I have given instructions for Laurel to deliver this letter to your common room, lest it be received at meal time and a Gryffindor teacher accuse such a simple, unextravagant discount as unfairly given.

Good luck with your studies,

Mrs Athene Greengrass

Harry frowns slightly, and then he glances through the vouchers that had been left in the envelope: they're of simple, golden paper, and their instructions say merely to place them in with an order form to

be sent to Flourish and Blotts.

Lycanthropy In Society: A New Plague, The Heirs of Salazar Slytherin, Catastrophes of Recent Past: The Dark Arts In Action, Ministerial Insight: A History Of The Ministry of Magic, Dressed To Impress: Wizarding Fashion And Its Influences and Charming An Audience With Spells and Smiles are the titles listed, and their authors are unfamiliar to him except for one " Dressed To Impress is written by A. Greengrass.

"What is it?" Draco asks, and Harry passes him the letter. Disappointment radiates from the other boy's form as he reads it. "Oh, is that all?"

"These are quite expensive," Harry says, trying not to sound as horrified as he really is " he had picked up all sorts of books in Flourish and Blotts, but the original prices on the vouchers all exceed to the money he'd paid for all his schoolbooks together. Thinking of the money stacked in his vault, Harry is guiltily aware he could probably have bought these himself, but the vouchers are a kind gesture.

"Oh, more so than school books," Draco says airily, "It's only a matter of politics " of course all of us could easily afford them." Harry grits his teeth, sits down, and begins to write a thank you letter. He does like Draco sometimes. He'll just remember that later.

* * *

><p>"But that's so unfair!" Hermione hisses as she drops a spoon of beetle eyes into their cauldron.<p>

"I don't think fairness is one of the Slytherin focuses, Hermione," Harry points out as he stirs the potion, watching it bubble from indigo to lilac.

"Well, you're not going to use them."

"Hermione, a lady sent me vouchers for six free books, just because I'm in the same year as her daughter. It's not her being like, malicious." Hermione frowns.

"But it's unfair," Hermione says again, and Harry agrees, but he doesn't want to be rude, and he does want more books for his little collection.

"And you'll be able to read them too," Harry points out, and Hermione opens her mouth to argue, then seems to reconsider. "It's not really that much different to all the books I got for Christmas, right?"

"Well, I don't want to read Dress To Impress," Hermione says, and Harry stifles a snigger.

"That's alright, Hermione. Dress To Impress can be mine alone."

"Mr Potter," says a slow, sarcastic tone from behind him. "Will dressing to impress, I wonder, assist in the use of your Wideye Potion?"

"It might, sir," Harry says reasonably, "Being awake's quite fashionable, so I hear." Snape stares at him as Hermione gasps, but the Professor's straight-lipped, neutral expression doesn't so much as twitch at Harry's cheek â€" Harry's beginning to wonder what would make the man flinch, and he sort of wants to find out. Professor Snape is scary, of course, but it's not like he'll kill Harry.

At least, not until they're onto poisons rather than antidotes.

"Five points from Slytherin, Mr Potter," Snape says, and glides to Neville Longbottom's desk, where sickly yellow smoke is beginning to rise in threatening circles. Harry turns to Hermione, who is gazing at him with her eyebrows furrowed in disapproval, and he grins.

"I'll send off the postal order tonight, then?"

"Fine," Hermione says, and they look back to their work. They're only books, Harry thinks. They can't be that bad.

12. Year One: The Mirror of Erised

Harry stares at page 36 of Lycanthropy in Society. He has been staring at the page for about thirty minutes now, and he isn't doing all that well in trying to keep reading it. Hermione sits next to him, ostensibly reading over his shoulder and actually doodling flowers absent-mindedly on a scrap of spare parchment.

The other books had been quite good, honestly. Harry had been fascinated by all the history and culture in Dress To Impress, and Ministerial Insight had been quite interesting even though it was dry and sometimes lilted into lists of names, but this one?

"I don't think I can read this any more," Harry says, looking at the illustration on page 37 of a werewolf's bloodied maw.

"It's just-" Hermione hesitates, not wanting to criticize the printed word in any respect, but struggling. "It just seems very harsh."

"Yeah," Harry agrees. He doesn't really know how to put it into words, the way the book feels so uncomfortable. It keeps calling werewolves animals, even when they're people sometimes, and it'sâ€" Well, the book started with a call to execute all the werewolves in the UK, which had been a shocking beginning. "Maybe we'll read it next year."

"Yeah," Hermione agrees, and she seems relieved as Harry chucks it aside, leaning back in the armchair. They're in the corner of the library, settled on one of the singular comfortable chairs in the ridiculously huge room, Harry sat on the seat and Hermione on the arm. The library spans forwards, and above them Harry can see three or four balconies for the next few library floors: they're on the ground floor, and occasionally a book will fly over their heads or past their table, but by now it's easy to ignore. "I'm bored."

"I don't think I've ever heard you say that before," Harry says

mildly as he reaches for the werewolf book and drops it into his book bag. He's bored too, though. It's ten o'clock on a Saturday morning, and they have no classes for the rest of the day. Hermione doesn't really like to play games like chess or gobstones much, and Harry is avoiding Exploding Snap until the burn on his left pinky heals up.

"We've done all of our homework," Hermione points out, watching as Harry stoppers his unused ink bottle and drops that into the bag as well. "It's only a week into term. There's nothing to really revise yet."

"No," Harry agrees, thinking. "Come on, get up." Hermione frowns at him, but then she shrugs, pulling her bag over her shoulder, and they walk together through the corridors on the first floor. "How many classrooms do you think there are in the school?"

"I don't know," Hermione says. "We have a Potions classroom, Transfiguration, Charms, History, Astronomy, Defence Against The Dark Artsâ€¦ And then they use Divination, Care of Magical Creatures, Alchemy, Muggle Studies, Ancient Runes and Arithmancy."

"So that's twelve classrooms currently in use, and then there's four or five in the school that are completely empty and that people can use to study," Harry says. "But there are at least twelve on this floor, and at least twenty on the fifth. Think of all the doors we walk past every day."

"They must be locked, though," Hermione says as they approach an unmarked door, looking a little bit nervous as she and Harry share a look.

"They could be," Harry agrees.

"They're probably completely empty," Hermione says. "Why would there still be stuff still in old, unused classrooms?"

"You're probably right," Harry agrees. "Probably completely empty." He grins at her. After a pause, she grins back, and he reaches for the door handle. He grasps at it, turning it to the side, and the door opens easily under his hand and creaks slightly as he pushes it forwards. The candles around the room flicker into life, and Harry and Hermione stare into the room from its threshold. There are a few desks stacked to the right of the room, and around its edges are mostly empty shelves, but on some of them are stacked a few books, various bottles and knick-knacks, some bottles of ink and some quills.

"People use the empty classrooms all the time," Harry says. "If we weren't allowed to look around, they'd be locked. If the stuff was dangerous, it wouldn't be here." As one, they step inside. Hermione moves to the six or seven books stacked on the shelves, glancing through them, and Harry moves to sit behind the teacher's desk, pulling out the drawers. Nothing is dusty â€" the house elves keep the castle far too clean for that, and except for a few very high ceilings and occasional forgotten corners, dust never forms anywhere in the castle.

Harry pulls out some blank scraps of parchment, an unused padlock, a small mirror. The glass is mounted in clean, carved wood, and around

its edges are motifs of tropical fish, its handle carved into the shape of a dolphin. It's nice. Harry wonders why someone would leave it behind.

"These are old textbooks," Hermione says, fingering over the spines in front of her. "An equivalent of Muggle Studies, I think, but less, um, respectful." Harry pulls a face, and he fingers the mirror in his hand before he puts it gently back into the drawer and pushes it shut again. The other drawers contain no similar treasures, but only more books about Muggle oddities.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione says, having pulled out a book from the very back of a shelf. "Look at this." He gets up, moving to kneel down beside her, and they page through a photo album — the photographs are sepia-toned and blurry, and the movements are jarred and stunted compared to those more modern magical photographs would make, but he smiles at them all the same. There are children playing, photographs of students passing around a ball in the classroom, a picture of a cat sprawled over the desk Harry had just been sat at. "That's so cute," Hermione says. "I wish I had a cat."

"Why don't you get one?" Harry asks as he turns the page, seeing the same cat curled in a ball in the desk chair. "You're allowed."

"I've never had a pet before," Hermione says, shrugging. "Maybe next year."

They put the album back after they've finished looking through the albums, and with that, they move onto the next unused classroom, and then the next. It's interesting, looking through the things professors had left behind, and they talk casually about things as they go, about classes and history, about the teachers that must have taught at Hogwarts over the years.

It's nearing twelve when they go into a fifth classroom, and they stop short as they enter inside, peering into the room. They'd thought it was a classroom, anyway, but it isn't, and nor is it a broom cupboard: the ceiling is slightly vaulted, the room round and curtained with blue around its edges. In the middle of the room, illuminated by a beam of sunlight that can't be coming from any window, is a mirror.

It's tall, ornately carved with gold around the outside, and it stands on two clawed feet. The gold, so different and so much brighter than the modestly carved mirror Harry had held in his hands earlier, strikes him as almost gaudy for a moment, but as they step closer they can see its delicate design.

"What is this doing here?" Hermione asks, frowning up at it, and she steps behind it to look at the back.

"Erised strah ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi," Harry says.

"Pardon?"

"That's what it says on the mirror." Harry steps closer, looking up at the carefully carved in writing, and he looks inside it. He almost lets out a shout when he realizes he's not the only person in the mirror, and he stares at his reflection, momentarily horrified. And

then he starts to recognize the faces. "Oh my God, Hermione-

"What?" she asks, coming out from behind the mirror and looking at him concernedly. "What is it? Is it cursed?"

"I don't think so," he says, reaching out and tracing over the face reflected nearest to him. When he turns to look, there's no one there.

"What do you see?" she asks, glancing at him. She stands to his right, and he looks at her strangely for a moment.

"Don't you see them?"

"I only see you," Hermione admits, and Harry nods his head.

"Uh, it's my family, I think. My mum and dad are standing behind me, but it's not just them - it's aunts and uncles and stuff. I recognize a lot of them from photos I've been sent." He doesn't recognize all of them, though. He recognizes some traits amongst the faces he hasn't seen before, but he doesn't know them like he does the ones he's received so far. The magic of the mirror seems to pull him in, and his heart aches for a few seconds as he looks over the faces, all smiling at him as they surround him and look proudly down at him, his family, a big family. The family he'd never had.

"Oh, wow, it shows your family?" Hermione asks, sounding fascinated.

"Yeah," Harry nods his head, and he steps out of the way of the mirror to swap places with her. "You try!" Hermione steps in place, and she stares into the mirror, her deep, dark brown eyes widening slightly.

"Oh," she says. Harry glances at her.

"What? Don't you see your family?" She mutely shakes her head, and she reaches out, touching the glass for a second just like Harry had, as if to see if it's real.

"No, I see me and you, some friends, and we're all at dinner together. There's a bookcase behind me, a big one, and my family are there, they're laughing with Percy Weasley - I'm wearing a suit, I guess I've got a really good job, and we all look happy. I," she stops short, her hand going up to her face, and Harry glances at her.

"Hermione? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," she says, closing her mouth and frowning at her reflection. "This is weird."

"Yeah," Harry agrees. He wants to keep looking, he really does, but he feels like they shouldn't. "We should go. It's nearly time for lunch."

"We should," Hermione agrees. She keeps looking up at her reflection, breathing in evenly and regularly. She starts to describe the books on the shelves behind her, what she's wearing, what Harry's wearing,

explains how cutely ugly the cat on her mum's lap is. They swap places, and Harry tells her what his dad looks like, what his mum looks like, and then starts to describe the relatives he knows. They swap again, and then again, and then again. The mirror isâ€¦ Hypnotising.

"Ah, children," says a quiet, sage voice behind them, and Harry stops in mid-description of his Great Grand Uncle's knobbly knees, looking back towards the doorway. Professor Dumbledore stands, hands clasped neatly in front of him, watching the both of them with his old, blue eyes. "Your prefects have been looking for you."

"Looking for us?" Hermione repeats. "But it's only-"

"It's six o'clock," Harry says, staring at his watch, and Hermione looks horrified. "How can it be six o'clock?"

"But we've only been here-"

"Ms Granger," Dumbledore says softly, and not at all unkindly, "Perhaps you had best go to the Great Hall and inform Mr Weasley and Ms Lanjwani of your respective safeties. Mr Potter will join you in a few moments." Harry and Hermione share a look, and then she runs off with her book bag in tow. Harry hadn't noticed it, but he's suddenly really hungry.

"I'm sorry, sir," he says, "We were just looking through the classrooms, and then we found this mirror-"

"Yes, Harry, the Mirror of Erised has enchanted many a young soul, and an old one. I shouldn't worry." With Dumbledore standing beside him, a look in the mirror shows only their reflections, and Harry looks at the old man's wizened face and bright, purple robes in the glass.

"Erised. That's what it says on the mirror."

"Yes," Dumbledore agrees quietly, "And what do you think it shows you, Harry? This mirror?"

"It's enchanted," Harry says, and Dumbledore gives a slow nod of his head. "It shows you- well, I don't know. It showed us different things, and Hermione is older in hers, but I'm the same age in mind, so it can't be the future, or the past, or a version of the present." Dumbledore is watching him expectantly, which Harry takes as a cue to go on. "And it's not necessarily stuff we can achieve, because I saw- well. What I saw was impossible. So it's not the truth that it shows. It's justâ€¦ What we want?"

"Do you believe it is truly that simple?" Harry shakes his head even before Dumbledore finishes the question.

"It's what we want more than anything, isn't it? What we want, like, before we even think of wanting anything else, what we want in our- in our souls? In our-" Harry's gaze flickers over the inscription again. "I show not your face," he says softly. "But your heart's desire."

"Yes, Harry," Dumbledore says. "That's quite correct. The Mirror of Erised shows one not merely what they truly desire, but what they

desire more than anything. Men have gone mad before its glass, my boy, but what it shows is merely a fiction. It is not a true reflection of the world around them."

"I'm sorry," Harry says again.

"You need not be sorry," Dumbledore says. "Were the classrooms off-limits, they would be locked. Were their contents dangerous, they would be removed." The arrogant part of Harry feels a smug thrill at hearing his own words come out of the headmaster's mouth, but Harry tries to stifle the feeling of satisfaction. "Nonetheless, this mirror will be rehomed quite soon. I should not advise you or Ms Granger to seek it out once more."

"No, sir," Harry says. "Do you, er, do you see anything, sir? When you look in it?"

"Oh," Dumbledore says, shrugging his ancient shoulders, "I see myself holding a pair of socks."

"A pair of- what?" The man is a loon. Draco, for once, was right.

"One can never have too many pairs of socks, Harry," Dumbledore says wisely, and he pats Harry's shoulder in a vaguely grandfatherly way. "Make your way down to the Great Hall, now. You and Ms Granger haven't eaten since breakfast, and you are in need of sustenance." Harry moves obediently out of the room, rushing down the corridor before Dumbledore can say anything else weird to him, and when he enters the Great Hall it is just behind Professor Snape, who turns to peer down at him.

"Oh," he says, sounding mildly disappointed, "It would seem you are both present and alive."

"I'll try my best to die next time, sir," Harry promises, and Snape's lips twitch. Harry wonders for a moment if he'll say something like, "If only you meant it, Potter," or "Five points to Slytherin for indulging my wishful thinking," or "Very good, Mr Potter," but Snape doesn't say any of those things.

"Eat," he orders cleanly, and makes his way up to the staff table. Harry shakes his head at the professor's retreating back, but at least he doesn't want socks more than anything else in the world.

Every teacher at this school is a weirdo, he's convinced.

13. Year One: Fainting Spells

Harry goes to bed at nine after eating his fill at the feast that night, and he tosses and he turns. His bed is too hot, but when he kicks off his blankets, it's too cold, and the lake is too distracting, but lying with his eyes closed is too boring. At one, he gets out of bed, gets himself a glass of water, drinks it, and goes back to bed. At three, he closes his curtains. At four, he opens them again. At five, he goes into the common room, jogs on the spot for ten minutes as quietly as he can, and returns to his dormitory.

He sleeps until seven.

The next night is worse. He sleeps, and then he wakes up, and can't sleep for ages, and then sleeps for what can't even be ten minutes before he wakes up.

The third night he cries.

The fourth night he spends half of the night in the bath, and wakes up in cold bath water at two in the morning.

He can't sleep. He can't sleep. How can he sleep?

* * *

><p>"What, are you at his beck and call?" Draco demands as Harry gets up at breakfast, and Harry huffs, staring at the other boy in disbelief. He doesn't have the patience for this, doesn't want to listen to Draco being stupid and cruel for no reason.<p>

"Draco, he just asked for me and Hermione to come down and see him. Hagrid's a nice man. Stop being such a posh, stuck-up little twit all the time â€" it's the reason you'll never make any friends that aren't after your money or your influence, and while you'll end up marrying some shrew who hates your guts." Draco stares at him, obviously floored by the harsh response. Half the first year Slytherins are staring unabashedly with him, but none of them seem able to say anything, their mouths wide open. It's not just the first years, either â€" there are third years and two fifth years that are looking at Harry with the same mingled horror and uncertainty.

Harry doesn't feel the slightest hint of embarrassment as he walks away from the table, giving Hermione a little wave and gesturing for her to come over to him. He's too tired to feel guilty. Draco's this snooty all the time, and Harry normally doesn't respond to it, but today? He's exhausted, actually, and hasn't really slept for the past few days, for the past week and a half â€" he keeps thinking about all the faces in the mirror, how he and Hermione had been in that little room for hours and hours.

It's not that he wants to find the mirror again. If it was that, Hermione wouldn't be able to sleep either, but she's sleeping just fine. It's not the actual idea of the mirror, or being able to look at his family like that again: that's not the problem.

What upsets him, what scares him, what's kept him awake the last three nights, is the fact that a simple mirror kept him unaware of himself for six whole hours, and he never even suspected, never even considered, never even thought that what might be happening was less than normal.

Dumbledore had found them, but that wasn't the point. Why did a thing like that even exist? Why was it in a school? Why had it affected him and Hermione so much? Even when he sleeps for a scant hour at a time, he has horrible nightmares, and it seems like the less he sleeps the more his scar aches and pangs in his classes.

"Hagrid wants us," he says, and Hermione frowns at him as they walk out of the castle and down towards Hagrid's hut. They have a half hour before they need to head to their afternoon classes, and when

they arrive Hagrid ushers them quickly into his little, wooden cabin.

Said cabin is hot.

The heat hits Harry in the face as soon as he and Hermione enter, and he gasps for breath, settling himself shakily down in one of the chairs by Hagrid's fireplace, which is far, far hotter than it ever has been.

"What are you doing, Hagrid?" Harry asks dully, staring into the blazing fire. It hurts his eyes, but after three days of barely any sleep, everything does.

"Oh," Hagrid says, grinning and rubbing his hands together, and Hermione moves up beside Harry, leaning down and peering into the fire.

"Oh my God, Hagrid, you haven't," Hermione says, and Harry glances at her before staring into the fire with a bit more concentration. There's a rounded sheen in the fire, as if something is in the-

"Hagrid," Harry says slowly, trying to force his exhausted brain into basic function. "That's not, uh, a dragon egg, is it?"

"Yep!" the groundskeeper proclaims proudly. Harry's entire body seems to say Oh, God, but his mouth can't really work out the words.

"Oh, right," Harry says dimly, "Is it going to hatch soon?"

"Next few days, I reckon," Hagrid says, but the pride is beginning to slip away from his face. "You alright, Harry?"

"Mmm," Harry nods his head. He and Hermione take some tea, with Hermione looking concernedly at him the whole time "Harry is so tired he doesn't even realize he's about to put one of Hagrid's rock cakes into his actual mouth, and Hermione has to grab his wrist at the last second to stop him from breaking a tooth.

"You shouldn't come to class, Harry," Hermione says, examining Harry in a way that makes Harry feel annoyed, but in a detached way, like he can't really get in touch with the feeling. His whole body feels heavy, like it's felt for the last week, and he feels hot and he feels cold, and he wants to sleep, but he knows he can't.

"I'm fine," Harry repeats, mouth functioning on autopilot, and he filters into the Potions classroom behind her. Snape stands at the blackboard, hands behind his back: in neat, scrawling hand-writing across the board, the potions ingredients and instructions for that day's potions are plainly legible.

Harry stops for a second, reading through the lines and lines of white chalk. The potion has no title, and Harry guesses they're supposed to work out what the potion does by the end of the lesson. Harry's eyes scan over the lines slowly, stuntedly, and after a second or two the lines seem to blur together in a way that frustrates him. Why won't anything work today? Why?

"Potter?" he hears a voice say, and he ignores it, trying to focus on

the board. Beetle eyes. Flobberworm mucus. Beetle eyes. Flobberworm mucus. Beetle eyes- aren't there any other ingredients in the bloody potion? "Potter?" The board tilts, and Harry feels a strong, bony set of fingers tighten on his shoulder, stopping the board tilt any further to the side. Harry feels limp, and his vision is darkening at its edges.

"Flobberwormmm-" Harry says blearily, and a falling sensation runs sickeningly through his body as he drops. Everything's so dark, and everything's so heavy.

When Harry opens his eyes, he's laid on the floor, on his back, and Snape is looking down at him. His hair hangs around his head in limp, slightly greasy curtains, and from his position Harry can see into the nostrils of his slightly hooked nose. He giggles. Snape frowns, black eyes widening in alarm.

"Can you hear me, Potter?"

"Yessir," Harry says. "I can see up your nose, sir." Snape's eyes close for a second or two, and he looks like he's suppressing the urge to snap Harry's windpipe as there's a titter around the classroom, disembodied and strange. Even lying back as he is, unmoving, Harry feels dizzy and detached, sick to his stomach and floaty.

"Be quiet, Potter," Snape advises, and he glances up. Harry tries to follow his gaze, but the movement makes his head hurt, and he closes his eyes tightly. "Take him to the Infirmary. Mr Malfoy informs me he hasn't been sleeping well, and I suspect sleep deprivation is the spell's cause."

"What spell is it, sir?" asks a soft, curious voice. Harry hears an exasperated sigh, not from Snape, but from Hermione.

"He means a fainting spell, Lavender, not a magic one."

"Oh, right," Lavender Brown says, obviously annoyed at the Slytherins' laughter, and Harry feels himself dip down again as his body begins to move. Thank God, he thinks. Levitation was making his head lurch horribly.

14. Year One: Dragons and Dungeons

Harry wakes very slowly, bit by bit over what feels like an hour or so. His eyes half-open, and then they open a bit more, and a fair while of just lying there after that, he shifts slightly under the light covers of the Hogwarts Infirmary's bed. Afternoon light is filtering in through the windows, their soft curtains wide open to usher in the pleasant brightness, and Harry is very, very slow about sitting up against the headboard.

"Ah, Potter, you're awake," Madam Pomfrey says, and she bustles forwards, reaching out and touching his forehead. Her fingers are cool, and he looks at her slightly blurry countenance as she looks down at him in obvious concern. He doesn't say anything, mouth dry and reluctant to open, and just lets her shift around his bed, plumping his pillows, moving things about on the bedside table. She mutters a few diagnostic spells, but doesn't seem as upset about the

results as she could have been, and then she gives a brisk nod and walks away. Harry reaches for the glass of water on the side, drinking from it greedily and setting it down empty before he puts his glasses on.

The hospital wing comes sharply into focus, and he looks around for any other people, but the place is empty except for him. He vaguely remembers being in the Potions classroom, tired and feeling faint, but now he's in pyjamas and settled in an infirmary bed, so he can't have just fainted.

"What happened?" he asks when Madam Pomfrey returns with a steaming glass of pink liquid, pushing it into his hand. He hesitates, peering down at it cautiously, but when he drinks it he finds it's absolutely tasteless, and it sends warm tingles up his throat and through his body as he swallows.

"You fainted coming into your Potions class, Potter, and when I had you up here, I gave you a potion to put you to sleep for a while. Have you been having problems with insomnia, nightmares?" Harry nods. Madam Pomfrey frowns slightly, taking back the glass. "I'm reluctant to give you any Dreamless Sleep, because we don't want you dependent on it, but I'm going to give you a nip of Drowsy Dragon before bed for the next week or so, and that should be enough to put you back in order." Harry stares up at her. He's familiar with stories of Poppy Pomfrey's firm hand and medical eye, but this seems very... Lax.

"Is that uh, is that it?" She nods cleanly, her lips pursed in concentration.

"Oh, yes. Many students have trouble sleeping through the school year, Potter, I expect it's the same for any boarding school. Are you feeling sick at all? You feel a tad hot, more so than I'd like." Madam Pomfrey speaks very briskly, but she's not nasty about it, and Harry shakes his head. Seeming satisfied, she pulls a white cloth curtain around his bed and sets his robes out on the bed. "You've been in bed since yesterday morning, and it's coming up to two o'clock. You'll not go to classes for the rest of the day, but you ought be fine. I'll have Professor Snape bring your potion by in the evening."

"Snape?" Harry repeats before she can leave the curtained in area of his hospital bed, and she arches an eyebrow.

"Your head of house."

"Yeah. Uh, does he brew the uh, Drowsy Dragon?" Madam Pomfrey shakes her head, tutting.

"It's a brand name," she says disapprovingly, as if the worst thing you could possibly give a child was a commercially brewed potion, and with that, she walks away. Harry feels like he's gotten off very lightly, but he isn't stupid enough to call her back, and he clambers out of the bed, pulling on his robes. He drops his wand into his pocket, pushing his glasses up his nose, and he picks up his satchel. He pushes back the curtains around his bed and then makes it up, setting the sheets neatly into place and adjusting the pillows. Glancing around, he sees Madam Pomfrey in her office, and he awkwardly takes a few steps towards the door.

"Er- sorry, Madam Pomfrey," Harry says. "Can I go?" She glances up from the paperwork on her desk, and then she nods her head. This is nothing like the treatment he got on the Quidditch pitch the other day, and he's somewhat relieved, so he just makes his way out of the hospital wing and down towards the Great Hall. He pushes open the broad, tall door, and the room has only the few students scattered about the four tables, chatting over snacks or getting a little bit of work done.

"Potter!" calls Afifa Lanjwani, and Harry makes his way over to where she's sat with a few other Sixth Years and Frank Richelieu, a complicated-looking game of thin, levitating sticks between them on the table. "You feeling better?"

"Yeah," Harry says, still not feeling entirely with it, and he nods his head. "Uh, yeah, I feel okay, I guess. Has Snape got classes right now? I need to ask about the work I missed-" Harry has the feeling that the Potions Master is going to kill him for having fainted in his class, and he considers this with a sinking feeling in his belly.

"Oh, don't be an idiot, Potter," Francois says disapprovingly, shaking his head. "Go down to the kitchens, eat something, and then go see your friends. He'll give you the work you missed tonight, after dinner."

"But-"

"That's not a suggestion, Potter," Frank warns, and Harry gives a weak, slightly embarrassed laugh at his and Afifa's stern expressions.

"Alright," he agrees reluctantly, and he doesn't complain when Frank reaches over and ruffles his hair to be even messier than it already was. He feels slightly detached and still somewhat floaty - not at all ill or faint like he had been yesterday, but just like he's missing something after sleeping for so long. Francois and Afifa are right, though, and he makes his way to the staircases.

* * *

><p>"You look much better," Hermione says when she comes out of Charms class, and Harry nods his head in agreement. Now that he's eaten and had some time to wake up properly, he feels much better, and he feels like he's actually able to make his way around and do things. "We should go down to Hagrid's."<p>

"Should we?" Harry asks, and Hermione looks at him for a second.

"Uh, yeah. Remember the, um," she glances at the other children walking past them, and she says, "The egg he's boiling? For tea?" Harry stares at her, completely flummoxed for a second, and then he remembers. The dragon egg.

"Yeah!" he agrees. "Let's run down!" They rush through the halls and down over the grounds, nearly slipping on the slightly damp path down to Hagrid's hut, but they both jump the fence into his pumpkin patch and towards his front door, barely taking the time to knock before they burst into Hagrid's hut. They picked exactly the right time,

Harry later reflects: as they enter, a hard little skull is just pushing its way out of the thick, shiny surface of the nut-brown egg.

"There you two are!" Hagrid says, beaming at them and pushing the door shut behind them. Harry and Hermione each perch on Hagrid's sofa, watching as the little dragon beats its way out of the egg. In a strange, slick and slightly disconcerting way, the little monster is almost cute. It's rather like watching a dilapidated, black umbrella hatch from an egg, and once it makes its way completely out Hagrid coos and pets the dragon on the nose. Harry smiles at the sight, but his smile drops a bit abruptly when the dragon sneezes and sets Hagrid's bristled beard on fire.

He puts himself out and reaches for the dragonling with his hands minimally protected by pink oven-gloves the size of dustbin lids, stroking over the dragon's scales and cooing sweetly at it, as if it's a new puppy. Fang, letting out soft, whimpering noises, cowers on the ground and flattens himself against Harry and Hermione's feet.

"Hagrid," Hermione says, "You can't be serious about actually keeping that as a pet."

"Him, Hermione," Hagrid says, "He's called Norbert! And he knows who his Mummy is! Yes you do, don't you, Norbert? You know I'm yer Mummy? Yeah, you do!" If Harry hadn't been awake before now, he certainly would be now. The little dragon's huge, bulging eyes are staring right at him as he jabs his claws into the thick fabric of Hagrid's coat, letting out chittering growls and wriggling.

"How, er, how big is it going to get, Hagrid?"

"Well, it's a Norwegian Ridgeback, Harry, judging by what it says in me book. He'll be about thirty, forty feet, once he's all grown up!" The factoid, delivered with a "Who's a good baby for Mummy?" and a little scrunch of Hagrid's nose, leaves Harry forgetting how to close his own mouth.

"Your house is built of wood, Hagrid," Hermione points out. "Your mattress is made of straw."

"Oh, we'll be fine, won't we, Norbert?" he promises, grabbing a bottle of reddish liquid and holding it to Norbert's sharply toothy little mouth, letting him guzzle down the contents. "Just fine!"

* * *

><p>"This is not going to be fine," Harry says as he and Hermione walk up to the Great Hall for dinner. Hermione shakes his head, staring into the middle distance and imagining the numerous ways "little Norbert" could probably kill their well-meaning friend.<p>

"How can he think this is okay?" she asks. "He- he thinks it's so cute."

"Well, when you're Hagrid's size and you can cuddle three-headed puppies, I guess Kneazle kittens don't really cut it," Harry says, and Hermione elbows him for making her laugh. "We need to get rid of

it."

"But we can't report it to anyone. He'd be arrested, it's illegal to keep dragons as pets. You need all sorts of licenses and safety precautions." Harry sighs.

"I don't think Hagrid believes in safety precautions," he admits, and Hermione nods her head. "Is there anywhere in the UK that like, takes dragons?"

"I don't know," Hermione answers, and they enter the Great Hall, sharing an uncertain look. "We should maybe look it up."

"Tomorrow, after classes, I guess," Harry agrees with a nod of his head, and he heads over to sit with the Slytherins.

"Ah, the sleeping angel is amongst us once again!" Blaise says as Harry settles across from him, and Harry sticks his tongue out in response. Draco is sat on Blaise's one side, Crabbe on the other, and Harry sits between Goyle and Nott, the latter of whom is examining him carefully. Blaise grins, showing all of his bright, white teeth, and says, "You feeling better, Harry?" Theodore glances at him with obvious concern on his face when Harry meets his gaze, but his posture is relaxed now that he's got a good look at Harry's face and a feel for his demeanour.

"Yeah," Harry says, nodding his head. "Yeah, way better." Draco is conspicuously silent where he's sat next to Blaise, staring down at his dinner plate, and Harry glances at him for a moment before he says, "Sorry about what I said to you yesterday. I didn't mean it, obviously, I was just really tired."

"It's fine," Draco says, stiffness melting out of his body like sand out of an hourglass, as if he hadn't thought Harry would rescind what he'd said. "Besides, I don't put any stock in what you say, Potter." Harry can't help his smile.

"You should, Malfoy. An idiot like you needs someone clever to look up to."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Oh, yeah."

"You need to grow a bit taller then."

"Oi!" The other boys laugh at Harry's sudden indignation, and Harry shakes his head, everything he has to worry about fading from his mind as their food appears on the table and he settles into his usual back-and-forth with his housemates. He feels really relaxed for the first time in a few weeks now.

15. Year One: Drowsy Dragons

Dinner is good. Harry has a big appetite all of a sudden, and he eats a good deal more than he usually does before standing with the Slytherins to head down to the common room.

"Potter," says a low, quiet voice from behind him despite the

loudness of the Great Hall's chatter and talking and yelling, but Snape has no trouble being heard when he wants to be. Harry hasn't actually seen his Potions Master raise his voice yet, and he has to wonder what sort of situation would necessitate. "You're out of the hospital wing, I see."

"Guess you don't need glasses as much as I do, sir," Harry agrees, and Snape's hand moves so fast Harry doesn't even see it: he grasps at the back of his head, letting out a surprised huff of laughter at the clip that caught him upside his hair, and he stares up at the man in amazement. It hadn't even felt like a hit, not really, it had just caught him off guard, and it doesn't even hurt. It's not anything like getting hit at home.

"Dispense with the cheek, Potter," Snape say lowly, face tinging slightly to a colour that could be called pink, if it was watered down with formaldehyde. "Your work, to be completed by Thursday." Snape pushes a set of papers into Harry's hand, his sallow, bony fingers keeping the little bundle together. Harry takes it, looking at the written out potion in interest, and at the ingredients list attached. "I will arrive at precisely 9:30. You will take your potion, you will go to bed, you will sleep. Is that quite clear?"

"Yes, sir," Harry says with a nod of his head. "Thanks." Snape stares down at him, expression set into the parody of neutrality you have to have when your face is incapable of implying anything but a not-so-subtle want to murder everyone around you. Harry opens his mouth, wondering if Snape is expectant, but then he closes it and just slowly steps back, rushing after the other Slytherins towards the common room.

"Did he just hit you?" Blaise asks, eyebrows raised in surprise as they walk through the corridors and down towards through the corridor.

"Not really," Harry says, shaking his head with a grin. "He just sort of slapped past my hair, really. You'd think he'd never actually hit someone." Blaise furrows his dark brows, tilting his head a little at the response. "It didn't even hurt," Harry assures him, and Blaise accepts this as an answer, giving a nod.

"Professor Snape hit you?" Afifa asks when he comes into the common room, apparently having heard it from someone else coming in, and Harry stares up at her, a bit exasperated.

"No. Or at least, if he was trying to hit me, he doesn't have much of an idea. It didn't even hurt." Everyone being concerned with it strikes him as a bit over the top, especially given that this is a boarding school. Isn't corporal punishment a bit more standard here? Afifa looks concerned, though, so Harry tries not to look too annoyed,

"What did you say to him?" Afifa asks. Harry's lip twitches, and he looks at his feet for a second as he tries not to grin.

"Uh, he said he could see I was out of the hospital wing, and I said I supposed he doesn't need glasses as much as I do." Afifa does a very good job of keeping her face straight, but Frank and the girls she'd been sat with all start to laugh, tossing back their heads. "He

didn't laugh either," Harry points out.

"You're an idiot, Potter," Afifa says, doing her best not to make it sound like a compliment. "But at least he didn't take any points off you. Go get some work done." Harry moves into the corner of the room, where the other first year lads are settled around a table by the fire, cards spread out on the table, and as he approaches Theo deals Harry into the game. The cards don't talk to you like wizarding chess pieces do, but occasionally they'll wriggle and let out noises of complaint at the way you're sorting your hand.

They only play a few games of Gin Rummy and then a game called Cheat that Draco suggests. That is, until Theo realizes that Blaise is cheating at Cheat.

"You just put down six cards!"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"You said three, and you put down six! Have you been doing this the whole time?" Harry tries to hide his laughter behind his hand, but Draco laughs openly as Blaise lays down his cards and puts up his palms in a gesture of peace. Theo flicks his cards at Blaise, standing dramatically and declaring, "I'm going to bed!" as the others laugh around him. Draco pulls himself up, also heading down the corridor to his and Harry's room. Looking to the stack of papers Snape had given him, Harry lays out the ingredient list and the potion's process in front of him, also grasping at his copy of One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi.

"You're going to do that now?" Blaise asks, muttering to the cards to keep still as he begins to stack them carefully into a card castle.

"May as well. What time is it? Nine?" Blaise nods his head, and Harry begins to look up each of the ingredients on the page in Magical Herbs and Fungi to see their effects and purposes. Flobberworm mucus, beetle eyes, powdered hawk talon... If he can't do it like this, looking at the sheet of ingredients and the potion's instructions, he'll brew it tomorrow, but there are only a few more clues you get from brewing it, really, like smells and colours. Short of testing it, he supposes, but Harry's not about to test out a potion if he has no idea what it does without knowing if he's even made it correctly.

He's very quiet as he works, drawing connections between each ingredient. This is the sort of exercise they'll have to complete on their final exams - most of the marks at this stage of study are to do with knowing the properties of moonstone, or the importance of using the right cauldron, but as the years go on puzzling out the function of a potion just looking at its process or its ingredients will come more to the forefront. It's a strange skill, Harry thinks, but he's seen Dudley watching Gordon Ramsay on the television, and he occasionally makes his chefs eat food and try and figure out what's in it. Snape and Ramsay would get on, Harry expects, and he smirks to himself at the thought.

What happens next has to be described to Harry in its full form at breakfast the next morning. The common room door slides open with a soft slide of stone on stone, and no one really pays it any attention

until their Head of House steps into the room. Throughout the common room, sprawled on couches or lounging in their chairs, the older Slytherins all sit up straight and watch him carefully: Professor Snape rarely comes into the common room, according to Frank Richelieu, preferring to see students in his office if anything's necessary, and so when he appears it's a bit of an event.

Harry, working hard on the problem in front of him, doesn't pay the sudden silence behind him any heed, staring down at the ingredients and frowning.

"I could just tell you," Blaise offers, flicking cards between his fingers.

"Cheating at cards makes the game more fun," Harry replies absently, "I don't want to cheat at this. Besides, I've nearly got it." He mutters ingredients under his breath, trying to force his brain to make the connections he needs. At this point, without Harry's having noticed him at all, Snape is directly behind the padded bench he and Blaise are seated on, leaning over slightly and examining Harry's workings over his shoulder, and Harry is expectedly oblivious. "It's a Forgetfulness Potion!" he says triumphantly, grinning as he circles active properties on his ingredients list with a scruffy hand and adding his name to the top of the page. "Isn't it? Yeah. Yeah."

"Yeah, Mr Potter," Snape agrees, stepping to the side of the table. Blaise and Harry stare up at him, the silence of the room hitting them at once. "It is. A point from Slytherin, Mr Zabini."

"Yes, sir," Blaise agrees, making no move to quibble.

"Sorry, sir, I'll just-" Harry chucks his book, ink bottle and quill into his bag, but Snape sets Harry's prescribed potion on the table, taking Harry's notes and folding them into a neat pile before tucking them into his robes. Harry stares at the man's chest for a second, trying to work out how someone could fit a pocket into a garment that's at least 80% pockets, and then he looks at the potion bottle.

It definitely does look like a brand thing - Harry doesn't know everything about the Hogwarts Potions Master, but he's pretty certain Snape would never paint a bottle to look like a Common Welsh Green, beaming brightly around its stopper.

"Why's it called Drowsy Dragon?" Harry asks, pushing forwards his glass of pumpkin juice and watching as Snape puts two drops into it.

"I don't know, Potter. I don't care." Harry takes his glass back, drinking everything he has left in it and setting it down. The potion sets a bitter note to the drink, and it takes effect almost as soon as he's swallowed, making him feel tired where a second ago he'd been wide awake.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry says, and Snape doesn't bother replying, merely inclining his head slightly and leaving the room as Harry and Blaise head in the direction of bed. There's no tossing and turning for Harry that night, focused on what magic can do to a person, or what someone could use it for. He just brushes his teeth,

puts on his pyjamas, and lies down. As soon as he's tucked up in bed, he sleeps.

* * *

><p>"And you didn't notice he was there at all?" Hermione asks, her deep brown eyes wide.<p>

"No! Apparently he was there for a minute or two, watching me work and Blaise mess about with the cards. Do you think his shoes are enchanted or something? There has to be some magic in his robes, the way they billow like that, and if you're going to enchant your robes, why not do your shoes as well?"

"Don't be stupid," Hermione says. "Why would he enchant his shoes?"

"Why would he style his hair the way he does?" Hermione shakes her head disapprovingly, trying not to laugh, and Harry says, "I'm not saying it makes sense. I'm just saying he probably has."

"You want enchanted shoes, don't you?" Hermione asks. "That's what you dreamt about when that Drowsy Dragon put you to sleep. Magic shoes." Harry grins, pulling a book from the pile beside them and scanning the page. Their search for British dragon sanctuaries isn't going well. Every sanctuary in the UK seems to have closed down in the past two decades, owing mostly to the owners treasuring their limbs and lives over the prickly affection of their dragons. And even then, none of them took Norwegian Ridgebacks - they were considered too vicious.

It's not exactly comfrorting news. "There's one in France, near Calais..." Harry glances up. That's actually quite close- "Oh, wait, no. It only takes sea dragons. I think we're going to have to ask one of the centres in Eastern Europe, Harry. There just aren't any nearby that take them."

"You'd think a Norwegian dragon place would want one, wouldn't you? A Norwegian Ridgeback."

"Yeah, for some reason, Harry, they don't want more vicious, spiny, venomous dragons the size of lorries wandering through the frozen tundra."

"You're not any good at sarcasm," Harry says affectionately. "Do you know that?"

"Shut up," Hermione says, and then, "Oh, look, there's the twins. I've never seen them in the library before."

"They're probably here to nick something," Harry says. "Percy was saying that Charlie and them once-" Harry stops talking, staring at the twins as they stop to talk quietly to one another, looking very seriously at each other's faces and then up at the second floor of the library.

"Charlie and them once what?"

"Oi! Fred, George!"

"Shush!" hisses Madam Pince, hovering out from between the shelves like a snake, and Harry whispers an apology at her as he silently, wildly, waves for the twins to come over. They stride over as one, looking expectantly down at Harry.

"And what does our favourite little snake want now, eh?"

"Deeds to the family home?"

"Mum's wedding ring?"

"Dad's wedding ring?"

"Your brother."

"You can have him," Fred says immediately. "He's free."

"Not Ron."

"Damn," George says. "Well--"

"Not Percy, either," George sighs loudly, rolling his eyes, as Fred hides his face in his hands. "I need you guys to write Charlie for me."

"What don't we do for you, Potter?" Fred asks, leaning his elbows on his brother's shoulders as George sits down at the table. "We'll be doing your homework for you next."

"I doubt it," Hermione says snarkily. "I expect he wants to pass his classes." Fred and George glance at Hermione, seeming amused. Harry can't decide whether they like her or not - she's not normally the sort of person they expect to see on their side, but Harry feels like the twins have an appreciation for the fact that her best friend is a Slytherin, even if they don't actually like Slytherins themselves, as a rule.

"We'll deal with you later," George promises, or threatens, maybe. Harry isn't actually sure. "Why do you want us to write Charlie?" This, Harry thinks, is the best thing about the Weasley twins. They're very willing to involve themselves in chaos and schemes and the like, even while they complete their own ones in the background, but they're also really curious. They honestly want to know what's going on, and that's what Harry is counting on.

"Hypothetically," Harry says, and Hermione hides her face in her book, apparently disapproving of Harry's plan before he's even tried to set it in motion. "If you had a dragon, and you wanted to get rid of it, what would you do?"

"Let it eat Marcus Flint, Ministry comes to take it away, job done," Fred answers cleanly, looking too satisfied with his answer. "Easy."

"If you wanted to get rid of it alive, and you needed to keep it completely secret until it was gone." Fred's eyebrows are furrowed as he peers down at Harry, and George puts his hand on his own chin, shifting his position slightly so that Fred can lean on him better.

"Where did you get a dragon?" he asks.

"It's not my dragon," Harry says quickly. "But if you wrote Charlie, it could be his dragon."

"What's in it for us? You already owe us two favours."

"One favour."

"Two," George insists. What is in it for them? Harry starts to think quickly, but Hermione gets there first.

"I'll put the horror of your choice in Percy's bed while you two are in classes and you have deniability." Harry stares at her, taken aback at the offer.

"Hermione!" he says. "That's- that's- that's against a rule." Then again, Harry reconsiders when she glares at him, smuggling an illegal dragon illegally out of the castle and illegally out of the country is a bit against the rules too. Her expression is entirely determined, and Harry feels a distinct and overwhelming admiration for her.

"Agreed," Fred and George say together before Hermione has a chance to reconsider. "You two are getting to be terrific little criminals, you know," George says approvingly. "Maybe you'll be the first people to ever break out of Azkaban."

"Azkaban?" Hermione says, horrified. "The wizard prison?"

"Don't worry," Harry hisses to her, gesturing for her to keep her voice down. "You're not going to get arrested for putting a dung bomb under Percy's pillow."

"Well-" Fred starts. "You could. Theoretically." That's the bad thing about the Weasley twins, though. They like to provoke chaos out of anyone.

* * *

><p>Fred and George send Hedwig with their letter, and Harry instructs her to make her way there and back as soon as she can, preferably without getting eaten by any dragons on the way. She gives him an affectionate nip on the ear before she makes her way off, soon becoming a speckled white dot in the distance. "I thought you'd already written Charlie?" George asks suddenly as they make their way down the slightly slippery, narrow steps down to the bottom of the owlery.<p>

"Did you just remember that?" Harry asks, walking a little bit faster.

"Merlin's trousers," Fred complains. "I'd forgotten about that. You lying little sneak."

"We wouldn't be friends if I wasn't a lying little sneak," Harry points out in what he feels is a reasonable tone, and Fred and George consider this for a moment before accepting the point. They don't actually mind being lied to, Harry surmises, if it's in the name of law-breaking or general tomfoolery. "I'm gonna go and meet Hermione

at Hagrid's hut, okay?"

"Righto, Potter. We'll see you at the performance later." Harry glances back, raising his eyebrows. Performance? But the twins are already running off in the direction of the castle.

* * *

><p>"Well," Harry says as he and Harry walk up the path from Hagrid's hut. "I think that went alright."<p>

"He didn't cry as much as I thought he would," Hermione says, though she looks severely uncomfortable - on the last bellowing blow of Hagrid's nose into his towel-sized handkerchief, she'd been standing a bit close for her liking. She'd taken the lead in breaking the news to Hagrid and in laying out their plan, but Hagrid hadn't argued too strongly. This was partly, Harry suspects, due to the swollen bite on the side of his neck.

"No," Harry agrees. "And I think some of the crying was because Norbert bit his knee."

"Come on," Hermione says, gesturing for Harry to come up the stairs towards the Gryffindor Common Room. Harry hangs back slightly as they slip inside, but there's no worry of his tie being noticed: they've come in just as the show is starting. Percy runs down the stairs in just a pair of boxers, painted from head to toe in forget-me-not spots, and for a second Harry thinks he's going to up and grab one of his brothers by the throat.

"Oh, Perce," Fred says, dodging out of the taller boy's way as George snatches his wand, "Come on! Don't look so blue!" Harry hides his mouth behind his hand, but Hermione doesn't bother, her lips twitching as she doesn't quite smile.

"I can't believe it," George says, "It's been months since I've seen him without his Prefect badge - I assumed he pinned it to his underwear when he didn't have his robes on!"

"Twenty points from Gryffindor!" Percy snaps as the Gryffindors in the Common Room cheer, and Hermione and Harry carefully step out of the portrait hole again.

"You oughtn't come in here so often," says the Fat Lady disapprovingly.

"You should take it as a compliment," Harry retorts. "Most Slytherins wouldn't bother."

"How dare you-"

* * *

><p>"Thank you, Professor," Harry says, putting forth his glass of pumpkin juice the same way he has for the past week. He glances up at Snape, who administers the two necessary drops with the same perfunctory distaste, "Sorry you had to come down here every night."<p>

"Were you left to give yourself your own draught, Potter, you would

have undoubtedly killed yourself. Dosages of these potions for creatures as young and undernourished as yourself are delicately balanced." Well, Harry thinks. That's not disconcerting at all.

"Thanks," Harry says, mildly nervously, and he holds the glass to his mouth, drinking up his juice. Snape watches him, black gaze as concentrated as usual, and then he gives a nod, walking out of the common room. Harry waits for a moment, letting the teacher leave, and then he sets the glass down on a table, carefully removing the plastic insert for his sleeping potion that he'd made out of one of Hermione's old retainers. Pulling out his Invisibility Cloak from where he'd stashed it behind an old photograph on one of the mantelpieces, he slides it over his head and makes his way out.

He moves as quietly as he can out of the common room and through the dungeon corridors towards the entrance hall, holding the transparent piece of plastic carefully between his fingers. Careful dosages, Snape had said, so he'll only give Norbert half of it.

"This is a terrible idea," Hermione hisses as they run down to Hagrid's, the both of them pressed tightly together under the cloak to avoid being seen.

"Well, yeah," Harry says. "I don't think any of us thinks it's any good!" Harry drops a little of the excess potion into Norbert's mix of brandy and chicken blood as soon as he and Hermione get into Hagrid's hut, but he gives the task of feeding the little monster to Hagrid. Not that little applies all that much anymore. It's been only a week, and Norbert's already almost the size of Fang.

"Wha'd you give him?" Hagrid asks as Norbert snuffles and goes almost willingly into the padded crate, curling into a tiny, leathery ball.

"Nothing, nothing," Harry lies. "He's just a bit drowsy, that all. You think we can lift him, Hermione?"

"We'll have to," Hermione says, gritting her teeth as she clasps one underside of Norbert's crate, and they bow their heads, letting Hagrid drop the cloak over their backs. Movement up to the castle and to the bottom of the Astronomy Tower is a little bit slow, because baby dragons are surprisingly hefty, but Harry is just glad they'd knocked it out. He's seen Norbert bouncing off the walls of Hagrid's hut, and he shudders to think what it would be like in just a little wooden crate.

"Hey!" Harry whispers to the Weasley twins, both of whom turn wildly towards them.

"I told you he was on the map," George mutters, shoving a bit of old parchment into his back pocket, and Fred elbows him. "You there, Potter?" He and Hermione put the crate on the ground and Harry pulls the cloak off, glancing back towards the corridor. He can hear scuffling and distant footsteps, but because of the way the castle carries sound it's always difficult to figure out which way someone's coming from.

"Bloody Hell," Fred whispers. "That's not an invisibility cloak, is it?" Harry opens his mouth to retort that it's none of Fred's

business, but then there's a set of much, much closer footsteps, and Fred says, "Merlin's balls."

"Yes, it is!" Harry hisses, pulling Fred and George to crouch over the crate and throwing the cloak over their heads. "And I want it back, do you hear me? It was my dad's, so if you lose it, or nick it, dragon smuggling's gonna be the least of your worries."

"Ooh, feisty-" George starts, but Harry kicks him hard in the shin to shut him up, and he and Hermione run towards the entrance of the tower's stairwell so as not to be found too close to the invisible trio.

"Who's there?" demands a voice in the corridors, and Hermione looks like she's about to melt into the stonework. McGonagall. Of course it had to be McGonagall, just their luck. But then there's a loud scuffle, a smacking sound, and then, "Mr Weasley! Mr Malfoy! What in goodness' name are you two doing out of bed?" Exchanging uncertain glances, Hermione and Harry lean out of the doorway to the tower's stairwell. Behind them, Harry hears Fred and George muttering to each other as they make their way up the stairs.

"Uh, nothing, Professor McGonagall," Weasley says. "Just, er-"

"Exploring the Hogwarts hallways? At nearly midnight?"

"Er-"

"And you, Mr Malfoy. I don't suppose you have a better excuse?"

"I was just looking for- that is to say, I," Malfoy's silver tongue doesn't seem to be serving him very well tonight. "I got lost," he finishes, unconvincingly. Harry shakes his head at the poor performance, as much as at the entire situation.

"He must have realized I'd left," Harry whispers to Harry as he watches McGonagall drag to the two of them up the hallway and to an empty classroom. "And went to look for me."

"Ron probably saw the twins leave," Hermione says, nodding her head, and her and Harry begin to creep up the corridor. Harry feels almost naked, traversing the corridors like this without the cloak, but so long as the two of them can just make it to the staircases, they can split apart and probably make it to their common rooms without being noticed, just so long as-

"Oh, naughty naughty ickle firsties!" says a high, reedy, mocking voice, ringing with delight.

Just as long as, for example, Peeves doesn't see them.

16. Year One: Detention

"Oi, Potter," Fred says when Harry comes into the Entrance Hall, and he and George approach him quickly. They look completely well-rested, as if they hadn't hauled a dragon up a flight of spiral stairs at midnight the night before. As Fred demonstrates a ridiculous set of purple sparks from his wand, George surreptitiously hands Harry's

cloak to him, and Harry folds it carefully into the bottom of his bag.

"Thanks," he whispers. It had kept him up a little the night before, worrying that the twins wouldn't give it back: Gryffindors are hyperfocused on honour and nobility, but relief still sings through Harry in waves.

"Our little brother got caught last night," George says disapprovingly, shaking his head in disappointment, "He must have followed us out. But apparently you did too."

"Draco and Ron must have run into each other, both trying to find us, and McGonagall caught them," Harry explains as they walk into the Great Hall. Harry wipes sleep from his eyes and tries to ignore the resounding want of his body to go back to bed - he's certain that Snape would haul him out by the scruff of his neck if he tried to claim illness after being caught out of bed last night. "Me and Hermione would have been fine, but Peeves saw us." George laughs, and Fred does too, but Harry doesn't take it as an insult.

"Charlie took the dragon okay, and he's going to send an owl once they've got it safely home. They said it was a good shout putting the thing to sleep, though, made it easier," Fred says, and Harry nods his head. Even if he and Hermione did get caught and will undoubtedly face some horrible detention, Norbert got away, Hagrid isn't going to be arrested, and he has his dad's cloak back - it could have gone much, much worse. "What detention are you serving?"

"I don't know," Harry admits. "Last time it was just cleaning out cauldrons for Snape for an hour or so each night, but McGonagall implied it was going to be particularly nasty, I think just because it was four students out of bed on the same night, and in different houses too." Fred and George nod, seeming to understand, and then, to Harry's complete surprise, George ruffles his hair.

"Off you go, then, you slimy little reptile. Face your peers." Harry shoves him in the side, and the twins veer off, laughing, to their own table, as Harry makes his way to sit with the Slytherins. Draco is in a sour mood, lips twisted into a scowl as he pokes vigorously at a kipper without actually trying to eat it. Wisely, Harry doesn't try and make conversation.

* * *

><p>Something is dripping in the potions office. It's not a completely regular drip, so Harry guesses it's not a pipe or an open tap, but every few seconds there's a quiet per-lisk as it drops down into a pool of something, and the noise echoes in the silence of the room. He can barely hear himself or Draco breathing, and Snape isn't making a single sound.<p>

He sits back in his chair, hands folded into his lap, back ramrod straight: on his face, twisting his ugly lips and filling Harry with a quiet dread, is a scowl. His gaze bores into the both of them, and while Snape will occasionally blink, he's so entirely still that Harry could almost believe him some kind of horrible parody of a statue. Now and then, he or Draco will open their mouths to say something, but Snape's scowl will deepen and his brow will furrow just a fraction more, and they'll close them again.

Harry doesn't know how long they've been standing there, listening to the irregular drip and trying not to shake as their Head of House stares at them, but it must have been at least ten minutes, maybe even half an hour.

"Your detentions," Snape says in barely more than a whisper, the sound carrying around the room, "Will be tonight, at nine sharp. You will arrive in the Entrance Hall at that time."

"Isn't that a bit, uh, late, sir? For a detention?" Draco asks, and Snape's head seems to move almost robotically on his neck as he looks directly at him.

"Indeed," Snape agrees, "Though it would also be late to be wandering around the castle with two Gryffindors in tow, would it not, Mr Malfoy?" Harry hears the audible gulp of air Draco takes down his throat.

"What will the detention be, sir?"

"Shut up, Mr Potter."

"Are you going to tell my-"

"Shut up, Mr Malfoy." The three of them return to judgemental silence, Draco and Harry doing their best to keep still under Snape's acidic glare, and finally, Snape says, "Get out." Neither Harry nor Draco need to be told twice, and the two of them virtually run out of Snape's office.

"Do you think he will tell my father?" Draco asks, looking anxious at the prospect as they walk up the stairs towards Charms class.

"You should write him before Snape does," Harry suggests. "Own up to it. I'll write him too, and apologize and say it was all my fault - I'll say I was going to duel Ron Weasley, and that you agreed to be my second." Lucius Malfoy, Harry has discovered, hates the Weasleys, and although Harry's never actually written to Arthur Weasley, his wife has made it pretty clear that the animosity between the Weasleys and the Malfoys is mutual. Draco bites his lip.

"Are you sure?" he asks, not at all looking his arrogant self for a moment or two, and Harry glances at him. If his father was alive, would he love the man as much as Draco loves his father? Would he be consistently terrified of disappointing him?

"Yeah, I'm sure," Harry says. "Your mum will still be annoyed, but at least Lucius will be on your side."

"Don't call my father Lucius, Harry," Draco complains, stepping into the classroom.

"What am I meant to call him? Steve? Anita?"

* * *

><p>Even with a little light-heartedness throughout the day, Harry and Draco remain mostly quiet in their classes, and when Harry settles to partner with Hermione in Potions come the afternoon, she's

equally subdued. "What do you think it's going to be?" she asks quietly. "Something in the greenhouses?"<p>

"Maybe," Harry murmurs, crushing some hydrangea stems under his pestle. "But they'd probably have told us to wear gloves for that. I think it might be something on the Quidditch pitch, revarnishing the fencing or something." Hermione nods her head, dread obvious on her features. Harry's never been a stranger to physical labour, and he thinks that for that reason the Hogwarts detentions don't usually upset him as much as they do some of the other students - they're an inconvenience, yeah, and they're definitely a deterrent, but when you've hand-washed Dudley Dursley's rugby gear, cleaning out an old cauldron or polishing a trophy is nothing.

"You Slytherins," Ron hisses from the next desk, aiming this at Hermione and Harry, presumably because Draco is on the other side of the room, trying to stop Crabbe and Goyle from blowing up the dungeons.

"I'm not a Slytherin, Ron," Hermione points out helpfully as Neville winces at Ron's obvious fury.

"It's your fault I've got detention!"

"You can't blame us for your getting caught, Weasley," Harry replies. "Just like you can't blame us for the acid you've just brewed up."

"What?" Ron demands, and then lets out a yell as he and Neville stumble back from their desk, Harry stands on his chair, gesturing for Hermione to do the same, and he helps her step across the room over a spare table to a distance a few feet away. Neville, lacking in both Ron's strategy of hopping back or Harry's foresight in reaching higher ground, lets out a whine of pain as his boots begin to boil.

"I'll help Longbottom to the hospital wing, sir," Harry says. "Finnegan, Thomas, d'you guys want to give me a hand?" Although they show a reluctance to go with Harry, the two Gryffindors seem to understand that the alternative to them is probably Crabbe and Goyle, and so they help Harry lift Neville to the edge of the room.

"How're the feet, Neville?" Harry asks as they make their way awkwardly down the corridor. Neville's hands are both grasping very, very tightly at Harry's left wrist, which gives him a clue to the answer in advance.

"Not so bad," Neville spits out, gritting his teeth so harshly that Harry winces. "Could be worse."

"Well," Dean says, "Can't say you're not brave about it, can we?"

"S'alright, Neville," Seamus says comfortingly. "At least you've not burned your eyebrows off, eh?" Harry had thought Seamus' brow was looking a bit bald recently.

"Keep up the Gryffindor courage," Harry says. "Nearly there. Madam Pomfrey!"

"Potter, you've not done something else!" comes the retort from down the corridor, and Seamus and Dean have to hide their snickers in the shoulders of their robes.

"Neville's burned his shoes with a messed up boil remover," Harry says to her as she comes out into the corridor, and the three of them release Neville as she levitates him into the air. "Is he going to be alright?"

"Oh, you'll be fine, Longbottom," Madam Pomfrey promises, answering Harry but directing the words at Neville. "I'll cool them down then I'll remove them, but the skin will grow back."

"Oh," says Neville, weakly, "Well, that's good."

* * *

><p>"Has Neville been returned yet?" Harry asks as he comes into the Entrance Hall, and Hermione glances up, nodding her head.<p>

"Yeah. He's walking just fine, too, but Seamus say his feet look terrible." Harry makes a face, but nods his head in sympathy. Neville had looked positively green as Madam Pomfrey had brought him into the infirmary, and by the time Seamus, Dean and him had all walked down to the classroom, everyone had gone. Hermione had put his bag right to the side of the room, out of the way, and Harry had picked it up, shouldering it as Dean and Seamus left. At his desk, Snape had been marking essays, concentrated on the messily scrawled pages in front of him, so Harry hadn't said anything, he'd just gone to leave. But then... "Snape gave me ten points, you know," he says to her, quietly. Ron and Draco aren't around yet, but they will be soon, "For 'taking initiative', apparently."

"He didn't give any to Seamus and Dean, did he?" Hermione asks, looking affronted at the unfairness of it.

"It's Snape, Hermione. A Gryffindor could pull him out of a burning building and he'd take ten points off them for creasing his jeans." Hermione laughs.

"He doesn't wear jeans, Harry."

"He might. We've only ever seen him around Hogwarts, but he might well be raised by Muggles, like us two." Hermione shakes her head.

"I doubt it," she says. "I- to be honest, I can't really imagine him having family. I mean, obviously he must, he didn't hatch out of an egg, but he's just so- Can you imagine him sitting down to a Christmas dinner with his mum and dad, and a little sister or something? Saying 'Please pass the brocolli.' or 'Isn't the snow lovely outside?' Harry starts to laugh so hard he can't manage an answer, and when Ron and Draco finally arrive, a minute before nine, he's doubled over and red in the face with laughter.

"What are you laughing at?" Ron and Draco demand as one, and then turn to glare at each other.

"Nothing," Harry wheezes out, trying to stand straight as Hermione sympathetically pats his back and calls him an idiot under her

breath. "It's not even funny."

"Ah, you're all here," Filch grumbles as he comes into the room, Mrs Norris hot on his heels. Hermione had tried to pet the little rat of a feline once, leaning down and offering her her palm, and Mrs Norris had left a scram all up her wrist. Harry despises the thing far more than he does Filch. Filch sounds disappointed about their presence, and Harry tunes him out as the four of them trail after him, outside and down the path.

"What are we doing tonight?" Draco demands, doing his best to sound haughty and making a similar effort not to sound as anxious as he is.

"You'll be helping the groundskeeper in the forest."

"Hagrid?" Harry asks at the same time Draco says, "In the forest?"

"Yep," Filch says, and Harry and Hermione share a look as Hagrid comes into view. Fang is sat at his feet as he loads his crossbow with bolts, and Harry suddenly feels a bit less good-humoured about the whole situation. "Here you are, Hagrid. I've just been-"

"Ah, off with yer, Filch, you miserable old sod," Hagrid says ill-temperedly. "Yeh've been complaing to 'em about thumb screws and that again, haven't ya? Taken you long enough." Filch lets out an irritable noise, but he doesn't bother to reply, rushing back up to the castle and the comforting paws of his evil feline. It'd be funny if Harry weren't so scared right now.

"Hagrid," Harry says cautiously, "Did he mean the Forbidden Forest?"

"Yep," Hagrid nods, picking up lanterns and handing them to Ron and Harry. "We'll split into two groups. Ron, you'll be with me. Hermione, Harry, Malfoy, you'll go off together."

"We want Fang," Malfoy says suddenly.

"No, we don't," Harry corrects him. "You can keep Fang." To make up for any offence, Harry pats Fang's somehow slobbery head gently. "He'll run away faster than you will, Draco, at the first sign of trouble."

"What sort of trouble? What are we actually doing? I'm going to tell my father about-"

"Draco, calm down," Harry says sharply, and Draco shuts his mouth with an audible click, going even paler than usual.

"Summat in the forest's been killing unicorns, and I've seen blood out in the forest today, which means one of 'em is wounded. We want to try and find it, and help it, or- or, well. Put it out of its misery." Hagrid looks quite upset at the prospect, and normally Harry would feel a bit of sympathy for the unicorn, but now? He's not really in the mood.

"No offence, Hagrid," Harry says evenly, "But can't something that kills unicorns kill us pretty easily?"

"Yeh'll be fine," Hagrid assures Harry unconvincingly. Harry's never going to illegally smuggle a dragon out of the country again.

"But aren't there werewolves in the forest?" Draco asks shakily. "You know, and things like that?" Harry remembers the stupid Lycanthropy book Athene Greengrass had sent him the money for, and tries to keep his tone gentle and understanding as Ron spits, "Shut up, Malfoy."

"It's a crescent moon, Draco. No werewolves."

"Yeah," Ron says, "Just giant spiders, and snakes, fire-breathing lizards, and things that eat unicorns." He looks positively gleeful as he stares Draco down.

"You know, Ron," Harry says. "Hagrid's a pretty intimidating target, so whatever's out there will eat you first."

"Settle down, now," Hagrid says loudly, spreading out his giant hands as Hermione pinches the bridge of her nose in irritation. "Settle down. Now, once you find it, send up some green sparks with your wand. If yer in danger or one of you is hurt, send up red sparks."

"Or just scream in agony and terror?" Draco asks sarcastically, but Hagrid doesn't seem to be that cognizant of his tone.

"Yeah," he agrees. Harry hands Hermione the lantern, pulling his wand out of his robes, and the two groups split up. The path into the forest isn't properly made or lined with stone or anything, but it's well-trodden, and Harry thinks he sees hoof prints in some of the ground.

"There are centaurs in this forest," Hermione says, following his gaze. "They mentioned it in one of the footnotes of Hogwarts: A History."

"I never read footnotes," Harry confesses. "Never read the indexes either."

"How are you two so calm?" Draco hisses.

"Well," Harry says, "My life started out with Voldemort murdering my parents, and her parents are dentists, so we're pretty accustomed to trauma, I guess."

"What the bloody Hell is a dentist?" Draco demands, and Harry lets out a laugh that doesn't make him feel any less nervous.

"Stop it, Harry, you're worse than Ron. They're like- They're Muggle Healers, Malfoy, but for people's teeth." Draco nods his head, and they walk a little farther into the forest, holding the lantern aloft to see the ground better. "Does it glow in the dark, do you think?" Hermione asks, and Harry shakes his head.

"No, there's some on the top shelf of the potions supply cupboard - it's that silvery stuff. It looks like liquid mercury. Quicksilver," Harry amends when Draco looks confusedly at him, and they keep on going.

"He shouldn't have done this," Draco says suddenly. "It's- it's ridiculous, sending eleven-year-olds into the forest like this. I'm going to write my father."

"This morning," Harry points out, "You were terrified of writing your father about this."

"That was when I thought it was a normal detention!" Draco half-yells, and the sound echoes through the forest's dank, dismal trees. In the distance, there's a harsh chattering sound, and then a loud thump. They all go still for a second, holding out their wands, but then it goes silent again, and they cautiously begin to walk again. "Why were you two out of bed anyway? I only left 'cause I saw you'd left, Harry. You weren't really going to duel Weasley, were you? Granger wasn't your second?"

"Duel?" Hermione asks quizzically.

"It was a lie I suggested he tell his dad," Harry explains, "And no, it wasn't a duel. We were meeting the Weasley twins for something that's none of your business. That's why Ron was out of bed - he followed them."

"What were you meeting them for?"

"None of your business is still none of your business, Draco, thanks for asking."

"You shouldn't be so chummy with them," Draco says forebodingly. "They could do you all sorts of damage."

"They're geniuses," Harry retorts, "And they're actually alright, so long as you keep them at a distance. At least I don't keep sucking up to Marcus Flint."

"What's wrong with that?"

"He looks like a troll, and he acts like one."

"Well, I'm not friends with mudbloods," Draco snaps out, and they all go abruptly still. Hermione's spine is as stiff as a rod, and Harry clenches his fist.

"Yeah, Draco, you're not. You wouldn't meet their standards." Draco lunges for him, and Harry tries to push him off him but he loses his balance, falling back and onto the ground, and he'd have gotten right up and smacked the other boy, but-

"Oh, God, no," Harry says as the wet splish of sound sings wetly in his ears. He can feel it soaking thickly into his robes, and he stares up at Hermione and Draco. "Please tell me it's not on you."

"It's not on you," Draco offers, as Hermione says, "It's all over you, Harry." That's the real difference between the two of them, Harry thinks grimly. Tact versus pragmatism. Harry pulls himself up, unbuckling his cloak and pulling it away. A little has gotten into his robes, and he can feel it wet and slick on his back, but most of it is only on the cloak.

"Voldemort aside," Harry says, "This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

"Stop saying his name," Draco hisses, and Harry suppresses the urge to throw his bloody cloak over the other boy's face. "It must be close," he says as Hermione and Harry glare at him, and he points down the trail of silver. They step awkwardly through the underbrush, dipping to avoid branches as they come away from the path a bit. There's blood everywhere, little droplets spattered all over the ground, and Harry's sympathy comes all in one go, making his chest ache.

"There it is," he whispers, and they all stop short at the edge of the clearing, staring at the unicorn where it's sprawled out on its side. A wound is harshly visible along its side, and it's breathing shakily, letting out pained whinnies. It's the saddest thing Harry's ever seen, its legs unevenly laid out around it, and he takes a step forwards, but Hermione stops him, passing him the lantern.

"They don't like men," she whispers, and he nods his head, stepping back again. Draco sends green sparks up into the forest canopy, and he and Harry glance to the right as the answering sparks are sent back. Hermione stumbles towards the unicorn, dropping to her knees and ignoring the way the blood gets onto the skirt of her own cloak. She puts out a hand, very very carefully touching the creature's neck, and the unicorn whines, its eyes going wide for a second before it seems to relax a little. Harry doesn't know how long he and Draco stand there at a safe distance, watching Hermione stroke the unicorn's neck, but when its chest finally stops moving, Hermione stands up suddenly, sniffing and wiping her nose on her sleeve. Harry reaches out to hug her, but then he sees it.

He grabs Hermione's robe and pulls her forward, dragging her with him, and the cloaked thing's hand just misses grabbing her hair. Harry's scar is burning pain into his flesh and through his skull, and Harry lets out a harsh noise as he, Hermione and Draco begin to run. They run together, but Draco rushes off in the wrong direction, and Harry lets out a noise of frustration as he and Hermione keep moving.

Seeing Hagrid's lantern in the distance, Hermione runs towards him, and Harry says, "I'm going to go get Draco."

"What? Harry-"

"I can find him, don't worry-" And red sparks appear some distance away. Harry sprints, ducking down through the trees, and he skids down a little ditch and out to Draco. The other Slytherin is on his side, biting hard at the inside of his cheeks to keep from crying out.

"What have you hurt?" Harry demands.

"My ankle," Draco says breathily, "I think I've broken it."

"Well done, idiot," Harry says, and Draco lets out the pained laugh Harry had hoped to elicit. He shifts forwards, putting his arm under Draco's and pulling the other boy up. Draco leans heavily on him, unable to put any weight on his injured leg. Harry's skull is still

throbbing with pain, but he tries to ignore it and support Draco.

Harry's blood runs cold as the cloaked figure looms towards them again, but before it can come forwards there's a loud pound of hooves on the forest floor and chases it off. The centaur approaches them slowly, and Harry stares up at him in awe, amazed by the sheer size of the man, at the thick muscle packing his form.

"You shouldn't be in the forest," the centaur says. "It is dangerous. Especially for you, Harry Potter." Harry sees Draco open his mouth in his peripheral vision, and Harry claps his spare hand over Draco's mouth to stop the racist trainwreck waiting to happen from leaving the station. This isn't the night for Draco's bigotry.

"We're just leaving," Harry promises. "Er, sorry, uh, sir-"

"My name is Firenze. We know of you, Harry Potter. Dangers will face you this year, and you ought be careful." The centaur looks down at him with his soulful, brown eyes, and Harry feels- Well, if he's entirely honest, he feels a little creeped out. Are centaurs always so intense?

"Right. Firenze. Uh, thanks - could you point us in the direction of Hagrid's hut, please?" Firenze stares down at the two of them, and then he raises his left arm, pointing. Harry mumbles out a quick apology, and he senses the centaur's eyes on them as they stumble in the direction indicated.

He and Draco stumble from the forest, and as soon as he sees them Hagrid runs over, taking Draco from Harry's arm and lifting him as easily as one of the Hogwarts chickens. Draco lets out a cry at the sudden change of position, and Harry cries out at the same time, clutching his head and tripping forwards, into Hermione as Ron exclaims, "Bloody Hell!" The pain only lasts a second more, though, and they all trudge towards the castle.

In the proper light, Harry realizes how much of the unicorn's blood had stained his sleeves, his shoulders, and how much of it had gotten on Hermione as well. Harry had gotten a little of the silvery substance on Draco's chest and back, but more distressing is the red blood Harry can see dripping from the harsh grazes on his hands and from under the fabric of his trousers.

Harry runs ahead, getting up to the castle first and pushing open the Entrance Hall doors for Hagrid to enter, but as he gets inside he slips a little on the ground, falling into his Head of House. "Potter?" Snape asks, staring down at him, and Harry nods his head, leaning back.

"Detention didn't go too well," Harry says, and then, "We need Madam Pomfrey, sir. Draco's hurt." Snape sets his jaw, and Harry watches as he adjusts his sleeves in the same meticulous way he had before facing the troll back in October, and he breathes in. At the very least, Harry thinks, no detention he ever has again can go worse than this one.

"What was he like?" Hermione asks, sitting cross-legged on the armchair beside Draco's bed. She's leaning forward, looking at both Draco and Harry with a concentrated, rapt expression, and as much as Draco tries to dislike her on principle, he's far too fond of being the centre of attention to be nasty.

"Oh, he was arrogant," he says huffily, and Harry shakes his head slightly.

"He was weird," Harry says. "Really intense, and he didn't seem to blink much. He said something about terrible things happening to me this year." What the centaur had said sticks with him, and part of Harry wants to go out into the forest and find Firenze, ask for more information, but he doesn't think he should risk it.

"Well, that's not good," Hermione says conversationally, "That implies it's going to get worse for you." Harry nods his sullen agreement, and he shifts his position on the bed slightly, leaning back against the metal footboard of Draco's hospital bed. It was a bad shatter of bone, so Madam Pomfrey had ended up vanishing the bones and giving Draco a shot of something awful called Skele-Gro. Draco's foot had initially looked like a horrible, deflated balloon of skin, but it's slowly starting to fill out again.

Draco is laid back on the bed, reclining on pillows, and even though he won't admit it, he's obviously glad Harry and Hermione have decided to stay with him all day. It's a quiet Saturday, and Theo, Blaise, Pansy and Daphne have all been by, but now it's the afternoon Harry and Hermione are just settling in with him.

Before coming to see him, Hermione and Harry had discussed the figure in the dark, and Harry had said, "I think it was Voldemort," in a slow, very quiet voice. Hermione had stared at him, and then she'd nodded her head.

"Yeah," she agrees. "You can't know, but-"

"Yeah." The idea fills him with a quiet dread, but also- A defiance, almost. Why should he be scared of Voldemort? Why should he have to be? He's supposed to be dead, and all that exists of him is a shadow, a shadow that apparently has to feed on unicorn blood. "It keeps you alive, doesn't it? Unicorn blood? It makes you immortal."

"Not like the stone's elixir does. It keeps you alive, but it's not sustainable. You have to keep drinking it, and-" Hermione had trailed off, then said, "Professor McGonagall says it stops you feeling things, physically, emotionally. You live like a ghost does. You're there, and you're moving about, but you can't feel anything. It's a half-life." That sticks with Harry even now, as he sits beside Draco's leg, looking at the Slytherin.

"Who brought you the sweets?" Draco glances at the jar of pink, powdery sweets, and he grins a little. "Francois," he answers. "Like our great aunt used to make, apparently." Harry stares at Draco in sudden interest.

"He's your cousin?"

"Second cousin," Draco corrects, and Harry nods his head. "We shared a grandmother - my father's mother was his grandfather's sister."

Harry thinks about it, and now he considers it, he sees some of the similarities. Francois doesn't have the same haughty attitude Draco does, and obviously with his dark skin and tendency to grin rather than scowl and look dramatic, there are a lot of differences between them, but...

"You've got the same nose," Harry says, realizing it all of a sudden. He'd never noticed before. Draco laughs, and he reaches for the jar, offering one to Harry. The bonbon is powdery and sweet and after Harry takes one, Draco pauses for a moment before offering the jar to Hermione. She smiles at him, and Draco offers a half-smile in response as she takes a sweet. "Do you want to say something, Draco?" Harry prompts, and Draco looks at him quizzically.

"Say something?" he repeats, tilting his head slightly.

"Starts with S, ends with Y? Five letters?" Draco stares at him blankly.

"You need to start doing the crossword in the Prophet," Hermione says after a few seconds of silence.

"Two Rs," Harry continues. "And an O?"

"Sorry?" Draco says. "Oh. Right. Sorry, Granger. For calling you what I called you." He stoppers the jar awkwardly, setting it aside, and Harry chews on the sweet, fragrant thing in his mouth - it's filled with strawberry gel, and it seems to explode in his mouth the longer it stays on his tongue. Harry swallows, and he glances to Hermione, who seems surprised, but not as annoyed as she could be.

"Apology accepted," Hermione says, slightly stiffly. "Though not quite forgiven. You don't know anything about Muggleborns, Malfoy. You don't need to be such a prat." Draco opens his mouth, but then he closes it again, just for a moment or two.

"We just need to educate him as to what the right sort of wizard is," Harry says, and Draco frowns at him, seeming honestly insulted, but Harry isn't going to apologize for that. He's not as bad as he was at the beginning of the year, with Harry or Hermione, but Harry still can't trust the other boy with anything actually important, and he wants to. Draco seems like he could actually be nice, if he thought about what he was doing once in a while. The same could be said of Ron Weasley, really.

"I'm going to head back up to the common room and do some homework," Hermione says, pulling herself and out of the armchair. Draco looks a little disappointed, not for losing Hermione particularly, but probably because he's going to have less company: Draco's social and driven by attention, and Harry's certain that if they weren't there he'd be kicking up a huge fuss for Madam Pomfrey's benefit. "Feel better, okay, Malfoy? Try not to break anything else."

"Do you want to play a game of snap?" Harry asks.

"Yes, sounds good." Draco moves a little to the side of the bed, and Harry pulls the chair closer so they can use half of the bed to play on - the sheets in the hospital wing are fire-resistant, and they don't singe as badly as Draco's and Harry's do. They play quick rounds, and Draco laughs when Harry hisses, drawing his hand back

just in time to keep it from being burned.

"Wizards are bloody mad, I hope you realize that," Harry says, flipping over two cards. "Muggle games aren't like this. Nothing sets you on fire, or squirts stuff into your eye, or comes careening towards you at sixty miles an hour while you're flying about, minding your own business."

"What are Muggle sports like?" Draco asks, flipping over three sets of pairs in a row with nimble fingers.

"Well, there's football. Two teams, and there's a football, which is a bit like the quaffle in Quidditch. Each team vies for possession, kicking it around the pitch - you're not allowed to lift it or touch it with your hands - and they try and kick it into the other goal. Then there's tennis, where there's a big, square court and a net across the middle of it. Both players have this thing called a tennis racket, and it's like a wooden Quidditch ring with twine criss-crossed over the hole. They hit a little ball back and forth across the court, making it go over the net each time, and points are scored when the other player can't keep it on the court or hit it back." Draco's aristocratic brow is furrowed in concentration as Harry manages to match two pairs; Harry wonders if Dudley would make a similar expression were Harry to try and explain Quidditch to him.

"Tennis sounds fun," Draco says finally.

"You'd probably like ping-pong more."

"Ping-pong?" Draco repeats, sounding horrified. "What sort of name is that?" Harry laughs, flipping over another set of cards.

"It's also called table tennis. It's the same rules, but you have a little ball about twice the size of a gobstone, and you bounce it over the table, over the net in the same way. It's kinda like the tennis court is made miniature. And instead of rackets you have paddles about the breadth of someone's hand."

"How many sports do Muggles have?"

"Oh, loads, and I'm rubbish at most of them."

"Do-"

"Hello?" Draco and Harry turn, and the happiness that breaks out on his housemate's face is dazzling as he sees his mother in the doorway. She all but runs across the room, leaning and hugging Draco tightly, kissing his face and cupping his cheeks. Harry smiles a little at them, and he glances up to Lucius Malfoy as he walks over, leaning and cupping the back of Draco's head to lay a kiss on the top of it. Narcissa Malfoy is dressed in soft, blue robes, and Lucius' are a deep green. Harry knows from looking at them that they must be expensive - there's all sorts of details to the sleeves, the hems and the collars, and they look complicatedly made.

Narcissa makes her way to the other side of the bed, and Harry puts out his hand to shake, but she pushes it aside and pulls him into a tight hug. Harry goes still, completely surprised as Narcissa hugs him to her chest, and then she leans back, pushing up Harry's chin so

she can look at his face. She's very pretty, but up close she doesn't look as severe and nasty as she had in Madam Malkin's back in the summer. She looks very pale, like she's been worried, but if anything she seems kind.

"Thank you, Harry," she says seriously. "You brought him out of the forest, didn't you?"

"It's not like I was going to leave him behind, Mrs Malfoy."

"Some might have," she says seriously, and she hugs him again. Harry leans into it, this time, and he realizes he hasn't really been hugged by an adult since- Well. Not in his memory, anyway, and it's nice, comforting. She draws her hand over his hair, and then moves back to stand with Lucius, leaning against him when he sets his hand on her waist. Together, like this, her, Lucius and Draco look like a picture-perfect family, like they've been made for TV or something. Against his better judgement, Harry laughs.

"What's funny?" Draco asks, and Harry shakes his head.

"Nothing, it's-" he abruptly reconsiders his decision to say "it's a Muggle thing", and instead says, "It's just how different you three look to Frank, that's all." Lucius smiles. He looks really good when he smiles, all white teeth and high cheekbones - Harry hadn't realized how similar Draco looked to him.

"Ah, Francois has been by? Very good," Lucius says approvingly, and he reaches out, drawing his thumb over Draco's face. Harry links the neat, looping handwriting he'd been reading for the past few months to the meticulously kept figure in front of him, and then Lucius says, "It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Harry, though I did not realize your hair was so... Unkempt, in person."

"No amount of conditioners would keep it down, sir," Harry says, and Draco looks between them.

"It's weird that you two know each other. It's like you're some sort of incredibly short, ugly uncle," Draco says, and Harry throws a card at him, forcing Draco to catch it with surprisingly quick reflexes.

"Oi!" Harry says, and Draco laughs, tipping back his head as he does so. "I'll leave you guys to catch up, then. You're lucky you came this afternoon, Mr and Mrs Malfoy. He was crying all this morning-"

"I wasn't!"

"Begging for pain relief, and for Madam Pomfrey to just put him out of his misery-"

"Shut up!" Draco's white cheeks are tingeing pink, and Harry grins at him. His parents have weird smiles on their faces, as if they've never seen someone Draco's own the age take the mick out of him - but then again, maybe they haven't. Draco's so upper class that children probably weren't allowed to play outside in case they got muddy when he was younger.

"Good evening, Harry," Lucius says, nodding his head, and Narcissa

gives him a surprisingly friendly wave. Harry's seen pictures of the two of them in the Daily Prophet, mostly of Lucius, and they'd almost never smiled. He's seen a picture of two of Lucius smirking, but he's never actually seen them giving genuine smiles like that, and Narcissa definitely hadn't smiled when he'd seen her in Madam Malkin's.

It's almost unsettling.

"Are you returning to the common room, Mr Potter?" Harry glances up from his own thoughts, and he meets Snape's eyes.

"Uh, yeah, sir. Did you want me to take anything down?" Snape is holding a stack of folders, and he looks dourly at Harry, as if appraising his ability to perform tasks such as "sit" and "lie down", before deciding he's capable of taking one of the folders in his pile.

"This is Ms Lanjwani's essay," Snape says, handing a blue folder to Harry, and he takes it, carefully stowing it into his bag. "You will give it to her upon your arrival?"

"Yes, sir, sure. Uh, Draco's parents are here."

"Lucius mentioned he would make an appearance," Snape says dryly, and Harry stares at him for a second, utterly taken aback. Snape peers down at him.

"What is it, Potter?"

"You called him Lucius," Harry says, light dawning.

"What would you suggest I call him? Anita?" Snape's sarcasm is thick and drips from his every word, infused with the utter loathing he has for Harry, but Harry can't even care. Snape. A person. Friends with Lucius Malfoy.

"You're friends," Harry says. "God." Snape arches an eyebrow. "Sorry, sir. I just sort of, uh- Forgot you were a person." Snape looks like he wants to pinch the bridge of his nose, but with the folders leaning against his chest, he doesn't have the spare hand.

"When you give Ms Lanjwani her essay, Potter, I suggest you not bore her with your inane babble."

"I'll try not to, sir. Does he call you Severus? Does he call you Sev?" Harry doesn't know why he's asking so many questions - the idea of the man he's had writing letters to him about government policy and the Ministry of Magic and Draco being friends with Severus Snape is blowing his mind. This is even better than thinking of Snape having Christmas dinner with his family - what do they do? Go out for coffee together? Go to Quidditch matches? Have dinners with Narcissa, Lucius, Snape and a woman Lucius is trying to get Snape to go out with?

Potter, given your recent foray into potential death, would you like another detention?"

"I'll go give her the essay now, sir," Harry says, and he walks off down the corridor before Snape can deliver on his threat or take any

points off him. He makes his way down to the common room, and Afifa thanks him for her essay. Harry glances at the clock. Dinner is in a half hour, but he has time to go up to the library and take out a book on grotesque transmogrification for his Transfiguration essay. He walks quickly back up through the halls, taking one of the shortcuts Fred and George showed him up to the second floor, but just before he exits from the stationery cupboard he's arrived in, he stops short.

The cupboard is in an empty classroom, but it's not empty right now - he can hear arguing, and he pushes the cupboard door open just slightly. Professor Quirrell is leaned right back against a wall, looking for all the world like he's trying to melt into it, and Harry's mouth drops open as he sees who's intimidating him into the position. The absent smile drops from his face, and his good mood vanishes.

"Well then," Snape says, "You've no doubt discovered the secret to Cerberus, but what of the other protections? Have you thought of a strategy around them?"

"P-p-please, Severus, I have no i-i-idea what you're-"

"Come now, Quirrell," Snape hisses, "What protection have you devised?" Harry slides to the floor, making himself as small and quiet as possible in the bottom of the cupboard, and listens to their conversation with a sickening feeling that weighs heavy in his chest.

Voldemort wants the stone, and Snape is trying to get it.

The realization hits Harry like a Bludger, and even after Quirrell scurries from the room and Snape stalks down the corridor the other way, he doesn't move. He can't move. His own Head of House is going to try the Philosopher's Stone, and there's nothing he can do about it.

18. Year One: The Philosopher's Stone

It's the first night for weeks that Harry isn't made sleepy by a potion or the sheer exhaustion of a few events, so that night when Harry lies down in the Slytherin dormitory, the curtains drawn all around his bed, he tosses and he turns, unable to get peaceful enough to sleep. All he can think about is Snape demanding answers from Quirrell, demanding the way to the Stone.

Was it Snape that broke into Gringotts back in September, and tried to steal the grubby little package the Stone had come in? How could Hagrid have taken a dragon egg from him, and never realized who it was? Was Snape harbouring Voldemort, the cloaked spectre that made Harry's scar hurt so badly?

It doesn't make any sense, Harry thinks as he exhaustedly lies on his belly, face pressed hard into the thick, downy pillows of his bed. Snape is nasty, ill-tempered and occasionally even cruel, but why would he do this? Would he really have done this? Harry can't sleep, can't just settle down and think of nothing. He crawls to the edge of the bed, slipping out and pulling on the snake-emblazoned dressing gown, slipping his feet into his boots and tying them up. He puts on

his glasses and puts his wand in the pocket of his pyjamas before he stands.

Draco is fast asleep, sprawled out atop his bedcovers with his normally combed-down hair a silver mess, his mouth slightly open, his body splayed out as if in his sleep he's trying to reach all four corners of the bed. Harry hovers a little as he looks down at the other boy, amused at the sight of his upright, aristocratic classmate so deeply asleep, and then he turns, quietly making his way down the corridor and into the common room.

A glance at the clock over the mantel tells him it's nearing 3 o'clock in the morning, and the common room is utterly devoid of anyone, so Harry isn't stopped as he exits. The coolness of the dungeons doesn't bite at his skin as it sometimes does. In fact, compared to the warmth of his dorm and the common room, the chilliness is welcoming, refreshing, and Harry walks through the dark corridors of the dungeons.

Torches line the stone walls, but in the night-time they're dimmed right down, offering only the barest hint of light as he walks down the dismal halls. He doesn't really have a destination in mind: he just wants to walk, walk until he stops thinking. He doesn't want to think about anything at all.

He knows that even if you can't sleep, you're not supposed to leave the common room, but he doesn't want to sit still, and in the middle of the night, it's far too late to explore the rooms in the Slytherin quarters. He doesn't even really want to explore. Harry just wants to be moving.

He's barely aware of where his feet take him as his footsteps whisper over the stone floors, making quiet clicks that echo the tiniest bit. On the groundfloor and up, a lot of the corridors are lined with rugs, but here in the dungeons they become inexplicably damp, no matter how many charms are cast on them. Afifa had confided that she expected this was an intentional design choice on the part of Salazar Slytherin, and Harry had found the idea funny at the time.

Now, with the satisfying feeling of his boots on the floor, the only noise to be heard in the whole of the Hogwarts dungeons, Harry understands it. He feels like he's the only person in the castle, the only person in the world, with no portraits or decorations lining the dungeon walls, they feel empty and endless, and for some reason that's not scary at all. If anything, it's comforting: it's like the comforting darkness of his cupboard back at the Dursleys, almost, full of spiders and dust, but not actually unpleasant.

He stops when he reaches the door to Snape's office, adjoining the Potions classroom, and he reaches for the door, turning the handle and pushing the door open without crossing the threshold. The candles in here aren't as dim as the torches are out in the common room, and on the desk bubbles a quiet cauldron. Harry had pushed the door open on a whim, wanting to see if it was locked or not, but now he steps cautiously inside, leaning towards Snape's desk.

The cauldron isn't pewter, like the ones they use for classes: it's silver, and standard size 3, according to the little plate on one of its legs. Harry breathes in, but the potion only smells a bit spicy to him - some of the seventh years can guess some potions ingredients

just from their smell, but Harry doesn't recognize the smell at all. The liquid is a soft blue and so clear Harry can see the bottom of the cauldron in its entirety, and it bubbles lowly over its heat, letting off a steam the colour of lilacs.

"Out of bed again, Potter?" Harry stumbles back in surprise, looking up at Snape. He hadn't heard the door behind the desk open and shut, and now Snape stands there, staring down at Harry with an inscrutable expression on his face.

"Sorry," Harry whispers, too suddenly terrified to say anything else, and Snape frowns at him, his brow furrowing. "I'll go-"

"Sit down, Potter," Snape orders, and Harry freezes, mid-step towards the door. He teeters, unsure whether to sit down or just try to run back to the common room, but even though Harry knows the dungeons quite well, he knows it would be stupid to try and run from a teacher, even if said teacher is trying to steal the Philosopher's Stone. Harry sits. The singular chair in front of Snape's desk is made of wood, and there's no cushioning or arms on it. It's not there for someone to be comfortable in.

Harry sits in silence, and he watches as Snape takes a glass stirring rod, carefully moving it clockwise through the potion in a slow, rhythmic fashion. Slowly, the lilac steam begins to darken, turning indigo, and then to such a dark purple it's almost black. Harry watches in silence as Snape carefully extinguishes the heat beneath the cauldron, and then begins to bottle the liquid within: it's now almost entirely clear.

"Do you know what this potion is, Potter?" Snape asks, and Harry desperately thinks of his textbooks, of the potions section in An Introduction To The Wizarding World, of the stupid trivia game Theodore Nott had tricked them all into playing last month. Would Snape kill him, Harry wonders? If he's truly on Voldemort's side, and is trying to get the Stone for him, would he kill Harry? But if that was the case, why wouldn't he have just let Harry die back at the Quidditch game in the autumn?

It could always just be a coincidence, and both Voldemort and Snape are after the Stone, but the idea strikes him as unlikely.

"Veritaserum, sir?" Harry asks. Snape arches an eyebrow, seeming what might pass as impressed on someone else's face.

"No, Potter, but they're not dissimilar in their appearance. Veritaserum is odourless: this potion is not."

"Oh," Harry says. "What is it, then?" Despite himself, he wants to know - what sort of potion could Snape be brewing at three in the morning, in the dark, on his own?

"It's a form of Auxilian Elixir," Snape says. "For abdominal pains."

"Pain relief," Harry says, peering at it. "Is it for girls on their periods?" Snape stares down at him, and Harry wonders for a second if he's said something wrong, and amends, "Uh, girls who are menstruating?" Snape looks, for the barest hint of a second, like

he's about to laugh, but the look is gone as soon as it appears.

"Very astute of you, Potter," Snape says dryly. "It is indeed." He pours the contents of the cauldron into four more little vials, and there are five small bottles lined up on his desk by the time he flicks his wand at the cauldron and sends it across the room to settle itself in the sink. "Why are you out of bed, Potter?"

"Couldn't sleep," Harry admits. "Why are you?"

"Because I am an adult, and am permitted to go wherever I choose. You, Potter, are supposedly restricted to the Slytherin quarters after nine PM, and yet you seem to believe the Hogwarts halls are your domain to be explored at leisure. Is there no end to your arrogance?"

"I didn't want to wake anyone up," Harry says.

"Of course you didn't," Snape says, not sounding at all like he believes him. "Your insomnia has returned, then?"

"No," Harry says quickly, "I don't think I need more of that potion or anything." Snape stares down at him, and Harry thinks that his eyes are endless - not in the comforting way the dungeon corridors are, but in a way that scares him, terrifies him, on a primal level. "Are you- I mean, like- are-"

"What are you babbling about, Potter?"

"I saw you. And Quirrell. In that classroom on the third floor." Snape stares down at him, silent. "You're going to steal it, aren't you?" To Harry's complete surprise, Snape laughs. The sound is short, harsh and completely surprising - it doesn't sound anything like a normal person's laugh, as if Snape doesn't laugh very often at all, and Harry feels like he doesn't.

"Steal what, Potter?" Snape prompts.

"The Philosopher's Stone."

"And where is the Philosopher's Stone?" Snape asks, narrowing his eyes slightly.

"Here. In Hogwarts. You tried to steal it from Gringotts, but Hagrid had withdrawn it first, from Vault 713, and now you- you're going to steal it. And become immortal." Snape's lips are twisted into an unpleasant parody of a smile, and he leans back against his desk, crossing his arms over his chest. Snape's numerously buttoned outer robe is open, Harry realizes now, leaving the white under robe entirely on show. It's strange, seeing Snape wear white somewhere other than slightly below his neck.

"How long have you known about the Philosopher's Stone, Potter?" Snape asks. Harry stares up at him, but now he's revealed this much, and he knows he can't run, he can't say nothing.

"Since January." Snape laughs again, showing off his uneven, slightly yellowed teeth, and Harry wonders if he's a smoker. The Dursleys had

always despised smoking: Uncle Vernon decreed it a sign of weakness, and Aunt Petunia had said once, wrinkling up her nose, that it stained things. Snape never smells of cigarette smoke, but it would be hard to tell, given that he always seems to smell of different potions.

"No, Potter," Snape says finally. "I am not going to steal, pilfer, or otherwise remove the Philosopher's Stone from its current whereabouts."

"But you were yelling at Quirrell."

"I was."

"You were asking about his protections on the Stone."

"I was." Snape answers casually, as if it's not suspicious at all, and Harry is left dumbstruck, mouth slightly open, mind blank. What is he supposed to say? How can Snape tell him he's not after the Stone after what Harry saw?

"You don't want the Stone?" he asks.

"Mr Potter, do you truly believe I wish for eternal life, or insurmountable riches?" Harry stares at him, then glances at the meagre accoutrements of Snape's office. Flitwick's office has little photographs on the walls, and all sorts of charmed figurines and toys and brightly bound books; McGonagall's is less bright, but has a Gryffindor scarf hung proudly on its wall, and a few ornaments here and there. Snape's office, by comparison, isn't dissimilar to an especially large potions store cupboard with a desk in it.

"No," Harry admits, a bit meekly.

"Then for what purpose, I wonder, do you believe I would wish for the Philosopher's Stone to enter my possession?" Snape is watching him intently, scanning every flicker of Harry's face.

"Voldemort isn't dead, is he?" Harry asks quietly, and Snape's expression doesn't change at all. "If he could get the Philosopher's Stone, he'd be able to come back. Be more than what he is now. Have a body again, be a real threat again. He'd try to kill me, wouldn't he?" There's a very long pause. The only sound in the room is Harry's breaths entering and exiting his lungs - Snape's breathing seems to be almost silent.

"You should return to bed, Potter," Snape says finally. Harry doesn't feel all that surprised that Snape didn't say anything about Voldemort, but a disappointment settles in his chest. "You need to sleep." Harry stares at his own feet, and at Snape's shoes. "I will accompany you to the Slytherin common room."

"You're really not going to try to steal it?" Harry asks again as he follows Snape towards the door of his office, stepping out into the corridor. As they move, the torches brighten up slightly for Snape, lighting their way.

"Are you?" Harry stares up at him, his gait quicker than usual in order to keep up with his Head of House's long strides.

"What?"

"It's a simple question, Potter. You are aware of the Philosopher's Stone, its location. Do you plan to steal it?"

"No!" Harry says, affronted. "Of course not!"

"Nor am I," Snape says. Harry is so irritated he doesn't even know what to say. Is he supposed to believe Snape? He hadn't given any reason for quizzing Quirrell, but Harry had believed him when he'd said he didn't want it. They walk in silence, and Snape murmurs the password for the common room entrance, ushering Harry inside. Harry glances back to him as the door slips shut, and Harry creeps back into his room, dropping hard onto his mattress with his boots and his dressing gown still on.

He's asleep as soon as he pulls the pillow under his head.

* * *

><p>Harry doesn't mention his conversation with Snape to Hermione the next day or even how he'd seen Snape and Quirrell arguing when they walk together down to Hagrid's. It's not that he doesn't think she'll believe him, or that he doesn't trust her with it: he just knows she'll ask a lot of questions, and Harry has so many questions running around his own head at the moment he doesn't want to add Hermione's to the swirl as well.<p>

They don't stay with Hagrid for all too long. Hagrid had had a letter from Charlie about Norbert, and he showed it to the both of them, letting them read through Charlie's gushing account of the dragon's growth. His handwriting's like his mother's, Harry thinks, but he supposes it was Mrs Weasley that taught her children to read and write.

The next few weeks go on in a blur - they revise for their coming exams, and then the exams are suddenly starting, and Harry's days are warm, hazy afternoons hunched over his desk in the Great Hall, writing essay after essay on what seems like a thousand things he can't possibly have learned in a single year.

But then the exams are over, and they all step out into the sun. "We have to do this next year, you know," Blaise says, and the relieved smile drops from Harry's face.

"Why did you have to say that?" he asks, wounded, and Blaise shrugs his shoulders, looking amused. Harry shakes his head, and he looks out across the grounds - there are students dotted all over the green grass, up the hill, and it seems like almost everyone is outside, enjoying the summer sunshine. There are only a few more exams for the older students to do, and those are NEWTs.

Harry makes his way leisurely inside, walking down to the Potions classroom to ask Snape who he should talk to about going somewhere other than the Dursleys' for the summer, but Snape's nowhere to be seen, and not in his office either. Frowning, Harry heads up to the third floor through the secret passage in the dungeons, and he glances into the DADA office, just to check.

Quirrell isn't in his office, either, and neither of them are invigilating exams or anywhere in the Entrance Hall or out on the grounds. They should be in their offices, or in their classrooms, packing up.

"Harry!" Hermione calls from a staircase below as Harry comes out into the Hall of Staircases, and she and Draco stand together.

"He's gone for the Stone!" Harry calls down, and Hermione's expression goes from curious and friendly to alarmed.

"What stone?" Draco asks, and Hermione ignores him, running with Harry as he comes bulleting down the stairs and down towards the Entrance Hall, Draco in hot pursuit on their heels.

"Professor McGonagall," Harry asks sharply, "Where's Dumbledore?" She stares down at him, nostrils flaring in fury at Harry's demanding tone and rude interruption, but for the time being Harry can't really care about what she thinks of him.

"Professor Dumbledore, Mr Potter, is away on business at the Ministry." Hermione and Harry share a look, and then they run off in the other direction, ignoring McGonagall yelling at them as they go. Harry doesn't even realize Draco is following them until he reaches the third floor and unlocks the door to the west corridor.

"Harry? What are you doing? What-"

"Draco, go downstairs," Harry says, and he and Hermione run into the door. In the corner, there's a harp playing soft folk music, and Fluffy is fast asleep, each of his three heads settled on the floor. They pull up the trap door, and Harry and Hermione stare down into the darkness.

"He told me- he told me he didn't want it," Harry whispers.

"What?" Hermione demands, and Harry just shakes his head. He can't do anything else - he jumps.

19. Year One: Facing Death

"Harry?" Hermione asks.

"It's fine!" he calls back. "I landed on something soft. Go, go tell McGonagall he's after the Stone, and I'll go on." There's a whoosh of air and a soft thump as Hermione lands next to him. "What the Hell, Hermione?"

"Oh, you idiot, I'm not letting you go alone," Hermione hisses. "Malfoy, you need to go to Professor McGonagall! Tell her that Snape is going after the Stone, and that we're going after him!"

"What stone?"

"Just go and tell her!" he yells. There's a third whoosh and another thump. For a few moments, in the darkness, there is silence. "Hi, Draco," Harry says sarcastically.

"Hi," Draco says, having the decency to at least sound embarrassed.

Harry pulls his box of matches out of his robes and flicks the red head over the side of the box, holding the tiny flame aloft to look around. They're on a bed of thick, green vines, and Harry's so surprised at the shift of one of them under his leg that he throws the match away. It alights on a tiny leaf, burning through it, and then the flame goes out, leaving them in darkness again.

"It's Devil's Snare," Harry hisses.

"Yeah, I can see that!" Hermione whispers back, sounding like she wants to hit him.

"Incendio," Draco hisses, and the flames flicker greedily over the thick vine, forcing it back, but the plant is too thick to burn properly, and he swears as the flame goes out. "So, we're all going to die by Devil's Snare because Professor Snape is searching for some mystery rock?"

"It's not a mystery rock- Look, we'll explain in a minute. Lumos," Hermione's wand bursts out with light, and the Devil's Snare retracts some. "Lumos maxima."

* * *

><p>It's with messy hair and a slightly dirty face that Harry stumbles into the third room, wiping his cheek with his sleeve. He'd hit the floor hard when they'd fallen from the Devil's Snare, and the ground had been grimy with soil and mould, but it's mostly off his face now. Explaining their being here to Draco had been a rushed affair, but now Draco has come this far with them, he's completely unwilling to leave.<p>

"What's this?" Draco demands as they enter the room, and the three of them stare across the chessboard. Each of the chess pieces is the size of a grown man, and Harry steps across the room, towards the door, but when he reaches the other side the black pawns block his way. "What are we supposed to do?"

"We have to play," Harry says. "To get across."

"Can you play chess?" Hermione asks. Her eyes are flickering wildly from piece to piece, but what can Harry say?

"Well," Harry says awkwardly. "I know the rules, but- I'm not any good. Draco?" The other Slytherin shakes his head.

"Father and I played when I was younger, but I've never been as good as he is, or good at all. Granger?"

"I'm not even that certain of all the pieces' moves," Hermione admits. "So I don't think playing across is an option." Harry is about to open his mouth to ask what other option there is, and Hermione holds up her wand to the pawn closest to them and says, "Bombarda." Harry and Draco duck their heads as the pawn's head explodes in a dusty burst of black stone, and then Hermione does it again, and again, aiming at different heads.

"What's the spell?" Harry demands. "Bombarda?"

"Straight wand movement," Hermione agrees. "It's a really simple

spell, but it's draining. It takes power."

"Okay," Harry says softly, nodding his head. "Bombarda!" The pieces don't move except to shatter outwards in dramatic showers of marble and rock, and they only destroy six figures before they step through the pieces and towards the door.

* * *

><p>By the time Draco and Hermione figure out the riddle, the both of them look drained. Draco is even paler than usual, and Hermione's eyes keep defocusing slightly, as if she's about to faint. Harry looks between the both of them carefully as Hermione points out the tiny bottle that will get him through the flames.<p>

"You two need to go back," Harry says. "You need to get help. I can just distract him, stop him from getting away."

"Is this worth dying over, Potter?" Draco asks, and the question hits Harry like a punch to the chest.

"What?"

"The Philosopher's Stone, the way she described it," he gestures to Hermione, "It's worth killing someone over. Professor Snape, if he wants it, it would be worth killing you over." Harry stares at the bottle as he takes it from the line-up.

"Go back, guys."

"Harry-"

"Go get McGonagall," Harry says firmly, and he swallows the potion, pushing himself forwards and through the flames.

* * *

><p>Harry ducks down as soon as he begins to move into the room, making himself less visible. The room is high-ceilinged and round, and in the centre, on a raised dais, he can see a figure barely illuminated by the bare light coming from the torches to the edges of the room. The figure is muttering, Harry can hear, and he creeps closer.<p>

Before the Mirror of Erised, hands clasped in front of him as he mutters to himself, is Professor Quirrell, and suddenly Snape's stupid, evasive answers from a few weeks ago make sense. God, Harry hates the man right now. Harry looks around, searching for him, and he sees a crumpled figure to the edge of the room, limp and still. Snape lies on his back, and Harry stumbles towards him, trying to see if he's breathing.

There's a wound on the top of his head, and blood seeps thickly into the professor's lank, greasy hair, making it look even wetter and darker in the dim light, but before Harry can reach out and put his hand to the man's neck, see if he's breathing, he hears Quirrell move suddenly behind him.

"Potter!" Quirrell says, and Harry turns to look at him. "Stand up," Quirrell orders, every trace of his stutter, nervous shakes and

anxiety completely absent.

"Don't suppose you'd believe I got lost?" Harry offers, and Quirrell raises his wand, but then another voice speaks. It's not Quirrell's - it's too deep and too raspy to be his, disembodied and imbued with a magic that makes it echo unnaturally throughout the room.

"Let him try. Put him before the mirror."

"Who's that?" Harry demands, but he steps forwards all the same, walking towards the Mirror of Erised. His heart pangs to look up at the familiar glass and its gold gilding. Quirrell doesn't answer him. Harry hadn't expected him to. He shifts on the dais, leaning forwards to look into the mirror, but his parents, his family, are nowhere to be seen. In the picture is just Harry on his own, dirt on his face, tie askew, robes dirty and scuffed and ripped in places from where keys had bitten into them as he and Draco had tried to grab the right one.

Harry stares into the glass, frowning at himself - his desires can't have changed, can't be different, can they? The mirror Harry shifts, winks at him, and holds a glittering red stone aloft. Then, he puts it in his pocket, and Harry feels the sudden new weight in his own.

God, Harry can't help but think. Magic is stupid sometimes.

"What do you see, boy?" Quirrell asks.

"My uncle calls me boy," Harry says conversationally, "I never did like it much."

"What do you see?" Harry stares into the mirror, looking at Snape in the reflection behind him, unmoving. Like this, dusty and with his robes around him, it reminds Harry of a dead bat. The comparison doesn't make him feel any better about the situation.

"Well, it's a big mirror. It's quite nice, I guess. It wouldn't really go with the décor in my bedroom, but I suppose it would suit a Gryffindor." Quirrell lets out a loud noise of frustration, stamping forward, but then comes that disembodied voice again.

"He's playing with you," it says. "Don't let him." Quirrell comes forwards, holding his wand up and squeezing its handle tightly.

"Potter," he whispers, "I know spells that will flay the skin from your bones. Look into the mirror and tell me what you see." Harry turns, staring at the glass, and he lets his face slacken.

"I see-" he breathes in, slowly. "I see my parents. They're standing either side of me, my mum, and my dad. My dad, he looks like me, or, um, I look like him, I guess. He's got the same glasses, the same messy hair. And I- in the Mirror I'm, um, I'm raising my wand-" Harry glances back to Quirrell, uncertainly, but the defence professor just hurriedly nods his head and reaches into robes, pulling out his wand. "I'm- I'm raising it slowly, and I don't know the spell - I can see it on my lips, though... Bombarda!" Harry whirls, but the red pulse of light misses Quirrell by inches and flies at speed across the room, hitting the wall with a harsh boom of sound and sending stone

and white dust showering from the brick.

Harry gasps, surprised by the way sensation rips down his arm. He hadn't yelled the spell back in the other room, hadn't thrown his wand forwards with such force, and he feels something like electricity wrench through his body, forcing him to crumble to the ground.

"Idiot boy," Quirrell hisses, snatching Harry's wand from him as he breathes heavily on all fours, coughing. His right arm is tingling, as if it's covered in pins and needles, and Harry's vision blurs for a second or two. In *An Introduction To The Wizarding World*, there'd been a passage on magic used by children. Wizards didn't have different levels of power, but there were different limits to which wizards could hold themselves to in terms of how much magic they allowed to travel through them, and the reason spellwork is taught from age eleven onwards is because too much magic in a young body can damage it, leave it stunted. Growing, using magic, lets you withstand more power at a time, use more magic and different sorts of magic.

Judging by the current pain rebounding from the tips of his fingers to his chest, Harry had just found his limit and jumped merrily over it with a spell he'd learned twenty minutes ago. And not only that, he'd missed his target.

"Silly Potter," says the disembodied voice as Harry crawls weakly forwards, trying to ignore the sheer weight of his own body. He wants to just crumple to the floor, close his eyes and let himself sleep, but he can't let his sudden exhaustion overtake him. "You're too young to wield such power, too small." Harry thinks of how pale Draco had been, and how uncertain Hermione had looked on her feet a few minutes ago.

But they'll have gotten back just fine. He has to think that. McGonagall is probably on her way, and Draco and Hermione are probably already in the hospital wing, and Snape isn't going to die tonight, because McGonagall's going to get here in time.

Harry crawls slowly towards him, feeling his body get heavier and heavier, feeling the tingling turn to pain as he shifts forwards. He feels the weight of the stone in his pocket as he reaches Snape, touching the gaunt face of the man with one of his dirty, dusty hands. Snape's skin is cold, but it's moving a little, and Harry glances back to Quirrell. The other man is focused on the mirror, his wand out as he murmurs spells, and Harry pulls the Stone from his pocket.

Scraping it against a piece of rubble that had been thrown forwards by his botched spell, Harry catches the tiny, ruby-red shards of the Stone that shake off of it. Reaching forwards, he presses his fingers into the worst of the blood at the top of Snape's head. Snape's hair isn't quite as greasy as it looks, but the wet, gooey thickness of the congealing blood under Harry's fingers makes him want to vomit as he presses the red dust into where he hopes the wound on Snape's head is.

Harry doesn't know if it'll work. He just has to hope it does - short of shoving the entire Stone into Snape's mouth like a bezoar, he doesn't know what else to do. He doesn't know if he's imagining it

when the blood stops feeling as hot against his fingers, and he doesn't know if his exhausted, aching eyes are playing tricks on him when Snape's chest seems to rise and fall a little faster.

"What is he doing?" hisses the voice. "He's got the Stone, you fool!" Harry's head whips around as Quirrell lunges towards him, and Harry waits as Quirrell gets closer to him, lets him get closer, and closer, and just as Quirrell is an inch from touching him Harry throws the Stone as hard as he can across the room. At the same time, just as the professor turns his head to watch the Stone's path, Harry brings the rock he'd used to scrape off a little of the Stone hard against the side of his head.

It barely makes a difference. There's no strength in Harry's arms, no resolve in his movement - if anything, he comes uncomfortably close to Quirrell's eye with the movement. Quirrell grabs him by the wrist, and Harry cries out loudly, dropping his makeshift weapon.

But Quirrell cries louder. Harry grabs desperately at him as he tries to pull away, needing to stop him from getting to the Stone, and he drags hard at the purple fabric of the man's turban, leaving it to fall in a long ribbon around Quirrell's head: as Harry grabs him, grasps at his head and neck and arms, Quirrell's flesh seems to blister and burn under Harry's hands, and Quirrell is screaming with pain as he falls. Harry stands over him, staring at his own hands, messy with grime and Snape's blood and brickdust, and then he looks at Quirrell.

Quirrell is writhing in pain on the floor, face pressed into the ground, but another face stares out at Harry from the back of Quirrell's head.

"Voldemort," Harry says, and he throws himself forwards as the disembodied voice screams for Quirrell to get him, kill him - Harry presses his palm hard to the cheek of the monster buried in the back of Quirrell's skull, and Quirrell is screaming, burning, crumbling under Harry's fingers.

Harry's vision begins to blur at the edges as he drops aside, and he feels like his hands should be hot, burned, but they're not, they're just fine.

"Potter," he hears someone say.

"Oh, good," Harry says, not knowing whether his mouth is moving or whether the words are only being said inside his own mind. "You're alive." He's aware of movement next to him, aware that Snape is talking, but he can't hear it, can't see anything. All he can see, all he can hear, all he can feel, is a thick, fuzzy agony that draws slowly over him and drops him, bit by bit, into unconsciousness.

20. Year One: Endings And Beginnings

Everything hurts when Harry wakes up. He lets out a sharp little sound of pain, shifting himself in bed, and a mercifully cool hand touches the hot, clammy skin of his forehead. "Give me a moment, Potter, I'll give you something for the pain," Madam Pomfrey's voice says quietly, missing its usual brisk tone, and she holds an

unstoppered vial to his mouth. Harry inhales, nose filled with the familiar scent.

"Auxilian Elixir," Harry croaks out, and he drinks the contents of the little bottle. The effect is almost immediate: Harry feels cool, tingling pressure run all over his skin, soothing the pain it runs over, and he drops back against his pillow, staring up at the blurry ceiling.

"You've been comatose for two days, Mr Potter," Madam Pomfrey says quietly, and as Harry carefully leans up against the headboard, she hands him his glasses. He puts them on, looking up at her concerned face, her lips pursed as she analyses Harry's face, obviously looking for anything she needs to immediately treat. "What spell did you use?"

"Spell?" Harry asks, feeling the dry crack in his voice and reaching with a slightly shaky hand for the glass of water next to his bed, drinking from it greedily to help his parched throat.

"You burned veins in your right arm, Potter," Madam Pomfrey says seriously, looking down at him with a frown on her face. "Magical exertion." Harry stares at his right arm, which seems completely fine. Magical exertion, he'd have thought, would have left something cool - maybe lightning style swatches of scarring all up the skin. "The damage was on the inside, under the skin. I've fixed it as best I can, but it's best you not cast any spells for the rest of the week."

"Bombarda," Harry answers. "Hermione taught it to us like a half hour before - I didn't know any other spells that could stop him."

"Not as bad as it could have been," she says, nodding her head. "Professor Dumbledore will come in to speak with you now. You feel up to it?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Harry says, "I'll send you some flowers." She laughs, putting her hand over her own chest for a moment, and she seems honestly amused at the comment - it's nice to see Madam Pomfrey laugh.

"You have enough of your own, I should think," she says briskly, and she walks off with a smile still on her face. Harry furrows his brow slightly at the comment, but then he turns his head, staring at the collections of sweets beside his bed, as well as big, bright daisies in a vase. Harry smiles, reaching out and brushing his thumb over one of their thick, white petals.

"I believe Mr Zabini collected those for you, Mr Potter," Dumbledore says in a light and friendly tone and he slowly steps into the room. He's wearing deep, blue robes today, but his long beard remains tucked neatly under the purple belt that keeps them cinched at his waist. In a parallel universe, Harry expects the old man is actually quite fashionable.

"They grow at the edge of the forest," Harry says. "He knows how to make poison out of the stems, apparently, but I'm glad he just put them in a vase." Dumbledore gives a low chuckle, slowly lowering himself into a chair at the side of Harry's bed, and Harry draws his hand away from the vase.

"You have numerous letters awaiting your attention, of course," Dumbledore says, and he indicates a neatly made wooden box on the floor beside Harry's bed, filled with neatly folded sheets of paper, twine-tied scrolls and coloured envelopes. "You have achieved astounding popularity for such a young man."

"Hermione keeps saying my hair adds to my charisma," Harry replies, not really able to think of anything serious to say, and Dumbledore smiles at him, his ancient face showing all sorts of new wrinkles as his lips move. "Is Professor Snape okay?"

"He is just fine. Young Ms Granger and Mr Malfoy are quite well too - they were mildly over-exerted, but they didn't sustain similar damage to yourself. Professor Snape's head wound was quite healed by the Stone's powder - an inspired idea, Mr Potter, under the circumstances." Harry remembers the thick, hot feel of Snape's thickening blood under his fingers as he rubbed in the powder, and he suppresses the urge to retch.

"He's not going to live forever or anything, is he?" he asks. "It just healed him?"

"The flesh was knitted together by the restorative properties of the Stone, but he did not drink the Elixir of Life. He will lead his life as he would have done," Professor Dumbledore answers delicately, and Harry lets out a small sigh of relief. "Ms Granger has informed me that the three of you were intent on preventing he get the Stone."

"Snape told me he didn't want it," Harry says, feeling stupid. "I should have realized- I should have figured out it was Quirrell that was after it, that Voldemort and Quirrell-" Harry remembers the sick carving of Voldemort's face into the back of Quirrell's skull, moving its lips and its face as if it belonged there. "I should have figured it out." Dumbledore is watching him, his blue eyes twinkling in the same way they always seem to. Harry wishes he could figure out what the old man was thinking. "But the Stone is safe, and Quirrell- he's dead, isn't he? I killed him?" Dumbledore's eyes widen, and he seems surprised for a moment.

"With the presence of Lord Voldemort sharing his body, Mr Potter," Dumbledore says, "The tax on his body would soon have killed him anyway. He would soon have died. You did not kill him." The words are said to comfort him, but Harry doesn't really feel comforted at all: there is no guilt for the words to soothe. He'd had to stop Quirrell from getting the Stone, had to stop Voldemort, and Harry doesn't feel guilty at all for what he did.

"I burned him," Harry says. "With just my hands. I've never done that before, and it didn't feel like accidental magic. What was that?"

"When your mother stood before your crib and shielded you from Lord Voldemort, Harry, I believe you were left protected by it. Voldemort cannot possibly touch you, for you are protected still by your mother's love." Harry thinks of the woman in the photographs beside his head, the beautiful, smiling girl, not even twenty five, with burnished red hair and such big, green eyes. He feels his eyes begin to water, and he drags his sleeve irritably over them.

"He's not finished, is he?" Harry asks, furious at how suddenly thick his own voice sounds. He's not going to cry. "He didn't die, I felt him- I felt him go through my fingers, like a ghost. He's not dead, not really."

"Lord Voldemort will no doubt do his best to return," Dumbledore says, and Harry nods his head, setting his jaw. Slytherin House, Harry thinks, is all about ambition, and Harry's ambitions haven't really been all that concrete until now, but he wants to kill Voldemort. That's an ambition in itself - he'll wipe the monster out. "Madam Pomfrey tells me you will be able to leave your bed for the feast tomorrow evening. I shall see you then, Mr Potter."

"Sure, sir," Harry says, staring at his bedsheets. "I'll see you."

* * *

><p>Harry walks a little slowly as he stands from the Great Hall's table, and he smiles weakly at Hermione as she comes over to him. Draco had regaled everyone at the Slytherin table with everything that had happened, again and again, to stop Quirrell from stealing the Stone, and so tired of the story were the Slytherin students that barely any of them had bothered to quiz Harry himself.<p>

"You look terrible," Hermione says honestly, and Harry laughs, shifting his body and feeling his limbs stiffly and slowly agree to move.

"Madam Pomfrey said I'll be like this for a little while. Apparently magical exertion can be quite serious. Who knew?"

"Literally everyone," Hermione tells him seriously, and Harry laughs again, ignoring the pain it puts through his chest. "Do you want to share a compartment on the train tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I'm probably going to sleep for a lot of the way home, though," Harry admits. "One of the house elves said so long as I leave it on the train when we get off, I can borrow a pillow for the journey." Hermione nods seriously, and she then she throws herself forwards, hugging Harry so tightly he lets out a little noise of pain against her neck.

"Oh, God, sorry, did that hurt?"

"A little bit," Harry nods. "But it's fine." He looks up to the staff table, where Snape and McGonagall are stood on the raised platform still, talking very seriously together. Occasionally, one of them will point at Harry, so he has no misconceptions as to what the conversation is about. "Told you we'd beat you stupid Gryffindors," Harry says, indicating the green banners hanging merrily from the Great Hall's ceiling. Hermione snorts.

"Well, we'll beat you next year," she says firmly.

"I bet you a Galleon you don't."

"Mum always told me not to gamble," Hermione says, beginning to walk towards the door.

"You only say that 'cause you'll lose!" Harry calls after her, and he half-limps up to the staff table.

"You look well, Potter," McGonagall says unconvincingly.

"Isn't lying meant to be against your house code or something?" Harry asks, and McGonagall gives him a thin smile.

"Glad to see you're back to your usual self." Snape steps neatly from the dais, and he begins to walk with Harry from the Great Hall.

"Sorry," Harry says. "About thinking you were going to steal the Stone." Snape says nothing. "And, uh, you're welcome. For saving your life."

"Ten points from Slytherin, Potter."

"We just won the House Cup!"

"Then next September, Slytherin will begin at a disadvantage." Harry lets out a loud noise of frustration, and he glares up at Snape's slight smirk. "Go to bed, Potter."

* * *

><p>"Oi, Potter! What's this about you starting us on -10 points next year?"<p>

"It's not my fault Snape is a pillock, Frank!" Harry grumbles as he gets off the train, hauling his trunk after him, and Francois comes forwards, ruffling Harry's hair and pulling him into a half hug.

"It is, Potter," Francois says as Harry tries, and fails, to get free. "It's definitely your fault."

"Get off!" Harry says, and Francois ruffles his hair once more before he lets him go, grinning down at him. "Go Floo back to France already." Francois laughs, and he gives Harry a little wave as he makes his way down the platform. Harry watches after him for a moment, shaking his head, and then he turns back to Hermione.

"You got hold of your trunk?" he asks.

"Yeah. I'm glad I got that featherlight enchantment on it," she says, dragging it behind her on its two wheels, and Harry nods his head. They walk together, and they exit through into the main part of King's Cross station. "Mum, Dad!" Mr and Mrs Granger come forwards, both of them leaning down to hug Hermione as tightly as they can, and Harry grins at them. Mr Granger is about 5'8" with hair cropped short to his head and thickly rimmed, square glasses, and Mrs Granger is a tall woman with hair just like Hermione's, thick and curly down to her shoulders.

"And you must be Harry," Mrs Granger says, "I'm Peggy, and this is Jon." Harry grins at them, putting out his hand to shake. "Where are your folks?"

"Oh, they're coming tomorrow," Harry answers with a shrug. "I need new clothes in Muggle London, and I want to pick up some books for

the summer, so I'm just gonna stay at the Leaky Cauldron tonight and they're going to pick me up tomorrow." Dumbledore had said he had to go back, but he'd never specified he had to go back immediately. All three Grangers are staring at him in apparent horror.

"What?"

"Harry, you can't possibly stay in London on your own," Mr Granger says, looking affronted at the very thought.

"Why not? I'll be fine."

"Harry!" Hermione says, "You can't- you're too young." Harry stares at her, and he wants to point out that he just fought a Dark Lord for one of the most desirable objects in the magical world, but Hermione had asked for him not to mention that to her parents, lest they figure out how dangerous her new school is.

"We'll put both of your trunks in the car," Mrs Granger says, "And then we'll go around with you, alright? We'll have a meal in London, and then we'll drive you back home."

"No, no, Little Whinging's an hour out of London, Mrs Granger, you don't have to do that! I'll be fine!" Mr and Mrs Granger have the firm, determined looks on their faces that Harry recognizes from Hermione's own - there's no way he can possibly convince them otherwise.

"What do you need in London, Harry?" Hermione asks, and Harry looks helplessly between the three of the Grangers, hopelessly outnumbered.

"Well..."

* * *

><p>"Your parents," Harry whispers to Hermione as they stand on the driveway of 4 Privet Drive, "They're pretty amazing." She smiles at him a little, and Harry suppresses the slight inkling of jealousy he feels in his chest.<p>

"You're my friend," Hermione says, a bit awkwardly, but still in the same very quiet tone, so that her parents don't hear. "I've never really had any, so I guess they're overprotective." Harry throws her arms around her, and they hug tightly. "Did that one hurt?"

"Yeah," Harry admits. "But not as much." Hermione pulls back, grinning brightly at him and showing all of her teeth. "I'll write you tomorrow."

"Oh, it's okay," Hermione says airily, "I know I'm at the bottom of your correspondence pile. If there's any emergency, though, just call the house phone - you've still got the number, right?"

"No, Hermione, in the five minutes since your dad handed it to me, I've lost it." She slaps him in the chest, and then remembers and looks guilty as he winces. "I'll see you next September," he says brightly, grasping at the handle of his trunk and holding his shopping bags with his other hand.

"See you next September, Harry," Hermione says, going back to the

car, and Harry walks reluctantly up to the door of the Dursleys' home, ringing the doorbell with a resigned movement. 9 weeks with the Dursleys sounds terrible, but given the year he's had, it can't possibly be that bad.

He hopes so, anyway.

****FIN****

21. Year Two: The Long Summer

Summer that year in Little Whinging, Surrey, is hot. Harry sweats a little as he kneels outside, lips pressed together as he focuses on the wood fence in front of him. Dudley's idiot friends had cracked part of the frame away last week, and now Harry carefully nails it back into place. There are only four pickets that need to be replaced, and then he'll start about painting them white.

A white picket fence, in Harry's mind, only adds to the comically cartoonish state of Little Whinging's perfectly manicured lawns and flowerbeds, but Aunt Petunia had had it installed in January.

"Are you nearly done, boy?" demands Uncle Vernon from the doorstep. Harry holds the hammer in his right hand, closing his eyes for just a second to keep from snapping at the man.

"Nearly, Uncle Vernon. I'm just going to nail the last two panels in place, and then I'll put on the first coat of paint."

"The neighbours can see you."

"Can they?" Harry whistles. "I never realized."

"Don't you cheek me!" Harry rolls his eyes, lining up another nail, and he ignores Uncle Vernon as he stomps forwards, body rolling gelatinously under the brown fabric of his jumper and cheeks quickly purpling. Harry hammers the nail into place, carefully, and then he holds the hammer in his lap, looking up at Uncle Vernon with mockingly expectant eyes.

As soon as Harry had entered 4 Privet Drive upon his return from London, Uncle Vernon had snatched his trunk from him and thrown it under the stairs, locking the latch with a newly bought padlock. Only Harry's Muggle shopping bags and Hedwig had been permitted to accompany him up the stairs to Dudley's second bedroom, and all Harry actually had to entertain him inside were a few Muggle novels Mrs Granger had bought him as an early birthday present and the set of wizard-themed, Muggle playing cards that had made him laugh when he'd seen them in one of the charity shops.

Before driving him to Little Whinging from London, the Grangers had accompanied Harry in buying some extra reading material in Diagon Alley, as well as more parchment and quills, but they'd also gone through different charity shops in the Muggle part of London. Harry had picked up some Muggle trousers, t-shirts, jumpers and shoes that wouldn't raise eyebrows as much as Dudley's ridiculously over-sized hand-me-downs, and he and Hermione had also picked out some different Muggle paperbacks - Mr and Mrs Granger had said they didn't read enough Muggle fiction at school, and Harry didn't think they were

wrong. The cards had been a 50p afterthought, and he'd just thought the pictures of black-robed sorcerers and bright green witches were funny.

Three days into the summer, unable to do his homework, read any of his new magical books, and left to do chores outside, Harry's really beginning to lose patience with his Muggle relatives.

"Can I help you, Uncle Vernon?"

"You'd better not be doing- doing- that." Harry stares up at him. His wand is tucked into his jean pocket, and while he'd received a note explaining the illegality of performing magic outside of school, keeping his wand to hand isn't against any rules.

"I can stop fixing the fence if you really want me to," Harry says dryly, "But I feel like Aunt Petunia might be annoyed."

"You know what I mean!"

"What?" Harry asks innocently. "Magic?" Vernon gasps, going such an extreme shade of purple he looks like he might spontaneously transmogrify into a plum.

"Don't," he growls, "Don't you say that word!"

"Spellwork? Sorcery? Enchantment?" Vernon stamps his foot hard on the ground, shaking his fist, but Harry doesn't even flinch. What's the man going to do, hit him? Lock him inside? Kick him out of the house? Harry could only be so lucky. Vernon stalks back up the path and into the house, slamming the door so hard behind him that the windows of 4 Privet Drive shake, and Harry looks at the picket in his hand, frowning.

Why is he doing this? He doesn't like the Dursleys, and by no means do they like him. He doesn't want to be here, but they can't actually force him to do these chores any more than Harry could force Dudley to say please and thank you. Harry drops the piece of wood on the ground, standing up and making his way into the house.

The television is blaring in the living room, and Harry can see Uncle Vernon and Dudley's eyes focused on the television, which is showing some cars racing around a track, and Harry leans to the left, peering down into the kitchen through the mostly-closed door. Aunt Petunia is concentrated on the cupcakes she's baking, intent on making them without letting a single drop of mixture touch the kitchen counter.

Harry turns back to his cupboard and, with a short, sharp movement of the hammer, he brings it down on the padlock's edge. The cheap metal snaps under the sudden pressure, and Harry pulls it off, dropping it uncaringly onto the floor with the hammer. Both drop almost silently onto the carpet, drowned out by the loud engine roars from the television.

He grasps his trunk by its handles, carrying it sideways up the stairs without letting it hit the floor. The charm on it means that once things are put inside the trunk, they don't add anything to its weight, but he still has to carry the weight of the trunk itself, and given its big and bulky shape, it's not exactly easy to maneuver.

Once the trunk is in his room, though, Harry sets it down, opening it up. In the corner of the room, perched on top of her open cage, Hedwig lets out a quiet trill of amusement.

"What?" Harry asks. "None of them stopped me." Hedwig tilts her head, looking at him in the strange, intelligent way she always does, and Harry smiles as he looks to the trunk.

The trunk is enchanted, as all of the trunks intended for Hogwarts usually are, and Harry pulls forwards the compartment intended for books, neatly putting his new Muggle books inside before he closes the compartment back. Each compartment is visible as a leather strap sticking out of an apparent drawer in the side of the trunk, but once he pulls it out, it expands and lets him add or remove objects. He opens up a compartment he hasn't used before, and he folds his new Muggle clothes inside. He never bothered to pack his things into dresser or wardrobe in Dudley's room, which are overfull with discarded junk, and it's nice to have his stuff in its proper place. He thinks about throwing the plastic bags the Muggle purchases had come in away, but then he shrugs, folding them and putting them in with his Muggle clothes.

With that, he removes some parchment, quills and ink from the bottom of the trunk, and he begins to write.

_Dear Hermione, _

_Sorry for the delay. The Dursleys locked my trunk up once I _

_got into the house, and I just pulled it out from under
the _

_stairs. They're probably going to have a little fit about
not _

_being able to withhold my evil magic stuff away from me, _

_but I can't just do chores all summer and pretend I'm not
a _

_wizard. _

_Hope your summer's going well, and write me back with _

_what you're up to! I'm probably gonna start on that Potions _

_essay tonight - I just wish the library in town was anything _

_like as useful as the one at school, but I guess we have to
make _

_do. _

_Speak to you soon, _

_Harry _

He shakes the parchment to dry the ink a little bit, and then he starts another letter.

Dear Fred and George,

_Hey, guys, hope you got home all day. I hear someone
confiscated_

_that toilet seat from you on the train, which is a real big shame -
_

_I feel like it would have been a really good thing to mount on
the_

_wall, you know, kinda like how like people mount hunting
trophies._

D'you think you guys would be able to teach me to pick locks

_the non-magical way? I've seen you guys get around padlocks
that_

_way, and I just had to smash a lock here with a hammer. My
aunt_

_and uncle locked my trunk out of the way, and I'd just like to
know_

a subtler way to uh, you know.

Defy my relatives, like any good kid should.

Hope Percy hasn't murdered one of you yet,

Harry

He puts a friendly note to Mrs Weasley with the one for the twins, tying the two up together, and then he ties all three to Hedwig's leg. "Hey, drop Hermione's off first, and then take the Weasleys', okay? I'm gonna write some to the Malfoys, and I need to write Amelia Bones about recommendations for defence books next year." Hedwig replies with a quiet hoot, giving an affectionate nip to Harry's cheek.

"Boy!" Harry hears Vernon thunder from downstairs, and he runs across the room, sitting down on his trunk. Uncle Vernon throws open the door, staring at Harry furiously. "You're not keeping that up here!" Hedwig hops to the windowsill, and Harry glances at her.

"Well, the thing is, Uncle Vernon, Hedwig's just about to take off some letters. She's going to go to some friends I have, you know, and it's not against the law to withhold my stuff or anything, of course. But the thing is, if my friends were to get these letters from me and then not get any more, or if you were to take my trunk away from me, they might worry. And they might show up at my house to see me, check in on me. In their... Robes." Behind Vernon, Petunia gasps, looking horrified. Vernon growls, and he slams the door shut without saying anything more.

Harry and Hedwig meet each other's eyes. "I think that went quite well," Harry says. "Don't you?" And with that, Hedwig flies from the room.

No one bothers to give him any chores after that. Harry joins the Dursleys for meals, eats quietly and leaves. He does the dishes if he sees some in the sink, but both Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon do their best to avoid Harry, and so does Dudley. The reason for the latter might be because Harry takes to reciting gibberish under his breath as soon as Dudley steps into his vicinity, but Dudley avoids him, which is the most important thing.

For the next few days, Harry stays in his room, studying the new books he'd bought and doing his homework. Occasionally, he'll play solitaire, and upon fiddling with the machine for a little while, he'd even managed to get Dudley's abandoned, handheld radio to work, and he listens to the radio. It's really nice, listening to the radio - occasionally the Slytherins would gather around a radio in the common room to listen to a play or an interview, and now and then they played a Weird Sisters record or something, but Muggle music is so different to the wizard stuff, and the radio announcers take their jobs a little less seriously.

He doesn't receive any letters. He's not angry or upset, but he's... Uncomfortable. With the number of letters he sends, how could it be the case that everyone would stop sending him letters at once? His Prophet arrives weekly, just as usual, but there's never any post.

A week and a half into the summer, Harry makes his way downstairs, picking up the phone from its place in the hall. He doesn't know why he isn't receiving any post, but he knows that it isn't right, or normal, and he knows it shouldn't be going on.

"What are you doing?" demands Uncle Vernon.

"Uh, using the telephone. I'm only calling London, so it shouldn't be too expensive, but I can give you the money if that's a problem."

"You can't use the phone," Uncle Vernon says, and Harry watches him for a second.

"You'd rather I walk into town and use a public payphone to call one of my wizard friends?" Uncle Vernon seems to consider this for a second, and then grumbles out a word that might have been "Fine." before he shuffles back into the living room. Harry punches in the number, and then he holds the handset to his ear, leaning against the wall.

"Granger residence," comes the answer.

"Hi, Mr Granger, it's Harry Potter," Harry says. "Is Hermione home?"

"Oh, of course, Harry, give me a moment-" Harry hears Mr Granger call upstairs for Hermione, and he hears the sound of her steps on a stairwell before she comes to the phone.

"Hi, Harry. Are you okay?" Hermione's voice sounds slightly sleepy, despite it being nearly 4 in the afternoon, and Harry expects that for the summer she's started staying up later than healthy to finish books, and he can't help but be amused.

"Uh, yeah, I'm okay, but did you get my letter? I've sent some to

you, the twins, Mrs Weasley, and then Draco, Blaise, Theo, a lady I know in the Ministry, Padma Patil, Afifa- I've sent off loads of letters, but I've not had any responses back at all. And I know it could just be a coincidence, because I'm still getting my paper, but..."

"I've sent you a letter, Harry," Hermione says uncertainly, "The twins said they'd sent you one too, and I don't know about the rest, but Padma always writes back really promptly, doesn't she?"

"Yeah," Harry says. "She does."

"This isn't normal, Harry," Hermione says, and Harry sighs into the receiver as Hermione confirms that he's not just being paranoid about this. It's going to be a long, long summer.

22. Year Two: Dobby & The Dursleys

The next morning, Aunt Petunia opens up the door to Harry's bedroom, and she stares down at him. Harry concentrates on the two books in front of him.

"What are you doing?" she asks stiffly.

"My Charms professor set us a riddle as a piece of extra homework. We get a mystery prize if we can figure out the answer - you can't charm, conjure or do any spellwork if you expect an ingredient to be magically active in the right way in a potion. It's why you have to either prepare ingredients yourself or have a traditionally enchanted set of equipment to prep them for you: ingredients work in different magical ways, but they'd be tainted if you used a spell on them. The picture's just a love potion in a wooden bowl, and there's magic in it, and I can't figure out how." Harry had really just been talking aloud, and now Harry glances up, staring up at his Aunt Petunia. There's something pinched in the expression on her face, her lips pursed. There's a long, pregnant pause between them.

"Sorry," Harry says, "No m-word." Aunt Petunia shakes her head, as if drawing herself abruptly from some reverie - probably about dropping Harry out of a window - and her eyes focus on his face again.

"Vernon has a coworker coming for dinner this evening," she says stiffly, raising her chin and making her long neck look even longer. "You are to remain upstairs, and make no noise. We've not told him you live here, and you aren't to allow him to believe otherwise. You will be utterly silent." Harry stares at her.

"Uh, no, Aunt Petunia, I won't," he says, "Firstly, because I'm a human child, not your pet rabbit, and secondly, because it will benefit you more to tell him I exist. Tell him I'm your disadvantaged, orphaned nephew who the two of you took in out of the goodness of your hearts, and how my debilitating shyness, numerous disorders and extreme uncertainty of strangers leaves me unable to come out and say hello." Aunt Petunia seems to consider this for a moment, and then she looks appraisingly at Harry.

"You won't leave your room," she says firmly.

"I usually don't," he replies, and he lies back on the floor as he stares up at the ceiling. Michael Jackson is on the radio again, and Harry closes his eyes, not really listening to the lyrics of the song as he tries to figure out the little, written exercise. It looks like it should be so simple, but it isn't. A wooden bowl full of liquid, and the caption says that it's full of active magic, but potions aren't actively magical.

Harry groans, and presses his face into the carpet. He suspects Hermione and Draco have already got it, given that they're both at the top of their classes, and Harry can't even hope one of them will send him a clue in the post, because his post isn't coming. He's so bored, he can barely stand it, and he's doing his best not to just read all of his books in one go.

There's a loud pop, and Harry sighs, wondering what the Hell Dudley is doing next door, but then he turns his head, and he freezes where he lies on his back on the floor. There's a house elf in his bedroom. Harry stares at it, wondering for a moment if he'd left something at the school, but this house elf isn't wearing the Hogwarts uniform of an emblazoned tea-towel - it's wearing a grubby pillowcase that dwarfs its tiny form.

"Harry Potter," it proclaims in its sharp, squeaky voice, "Must not return to Hogwarts this year."

"Firstly," Harry says, remaining on the floor and wondering if his life could possibly get more bizarre, "That's a really rude way to introduce yourself. Secondly, Harry Potter will go where he wants. Thirdly, why are you in my bedroom?" The house elf stares at him with its huge eyes, its mouth set into a serious frown, its little, leathery lips trembling. After a moment or two, Harry feels a little bad for being so sharp with the little thing, and he says, "Sorry." He sits up, rubbing over his own face, and he asks, more gently, "Why are you here?"

"I is here to warn Harry Potter, sir. Harry Potter must not go to Hogwarts this year - bad things will be happening this year."

"Bad things happen there every year. They're called exams." The house elf looks astonished for a second, and then wildly shakes his head.

"No, Harry Potter, sir, bad things, terribly bad things."

"What sort of things?" Harry presses, but the house elf lets out a wild noise, bashing his own head into the wall, and Harry grabs him from behind, pulling him away to stop him short. "Dobby can't tell!" the house elf wails. "Dobby shouldn't be here!"

"Look, uh, Dobby, I appreciate your concern and all, but I'm definitely going to Hogwarts no matter what you say. People would miss me if I didn't go back."

"People who don't even write Harry Potter letters?" Dobby asks, looking sneaky, and Harry stares down at him, anger flaring inside him.

"Pretty sure it's illegal to steal people's post, Dobby, even if you are a house elf. You'd better hand it over right now, or I'm going to

contact the Ministry." The house elf looks smug.

"And how would Harry Potter sir call the Ministry? Harry Potter is only a young wizard, and mustn't be using his wand for his spells."

"Harry Potter only needs to put his wand out to call the Knight Bus and scream bloody murder about the monster illegally stealing his post and threatening his family, Dobby," Harry says lowly as he clenches his fists at his sides. Why should this happen to him? Why can't he just have a nice summer, writing to his friends, without some bloody house elf stealing his post and trying to convince him not to go to school?

"Dobby would never threaten Harry Potter's family!" the house elf squeaks out, affronted and offended.

"Give me my post!" Harry snaps, and Dobby disappears with another loud pop. Harry sighs, sitting down on the floor again, and he turns off his radio, lying there in the silence of his bedroom. If he listens hard, he can hear Uncle Vernon regaling the Masons with a vaguely racist joke, so he does his best not to listen at all.

* * *

><p>"Yeah, so he's stealing my post. I don't know what to do, to be honest - I know I threatened about the Knight Bus, but without going to the Ministry myself, I don't know what I can do about it."<p>

"You'd think they'd have a phone in the place," Hermione complains, "It's 1992."

"I don't think 1992 means the same thing for wizards," Harry points out, and she gives a rueful laugh. There's a loud squeal of tires outside, followed by a scream, and Harry sighs. "Look, sorry, Hermione, I think Dudley's just run something over outside. I'll call you next week."

"Talk to you then, Harry. I'll send a letter and see if it gets through."

"Okiedoke, thanks," Harry puts the phone down, running to the door and pulling it open, but in the doorway he stops short. Dudley is nowhere to be seen - it's only now, having had two seconds to think about, that Harry remembers he's upstairs playing some videogame.

"Hi, Potter," Fred says, grinning down at Harry. He and George are wearing matching corduroy jeans and their F and G jumpers from Christmas, looking completely normal in Muggle attire. "Hope you don't mind-"

"But we're here to kidnap you," George finishes, and Harry smiles up at them, forgetting his annoyance at Dobby, and Dudley, and the Dursleys, and every other thing in Little Whinging that begins with D.

"Oh, brilliant," Harry says. "Come in, guys."

23. Year Two: The Burrow

"Boy! Who is it?" comes the demand from the living room, and Harry glances towards the door.

"Some school friends," Harry calls back to Uncle Vernon, "Don't worry, they're here to kidnap me." He says it in a casual, blasé tone, and the response he hears isn't entirely unexpected.

"WHAT-" Uncle Vernon seems to register the idea of Harry leaving the house, and Harry hears the armchair in the living room give a groan of protestation as his uncle sits himself back down in it. "Alright. Off you go." George snorts, following Harry up the stairs, and Harry runs up between him and Fred.

"How did you guys get here?" he asks, and Fred gives an easy shrug of his shoulders. Without robes draping loosely over them, Harry can see that the Weasley twins are actually quite well-muscled, especially around the arms, and he finds himself wondering if wizards have gyms. He can't really imagine Lucius Malfoy lifting dumbbells or doing push-ups, but maybe it's a bit like wearing jumpers, and only less serious wizards have them.

"Knight Bus," Fred answers, and he and George watch as Harry grabs his stuff together, neatly packing the few things that are left out into his trunk. "What, you not unpacked yet?"

"This is my cousin's second bedroom," Harry explains, not looking up from his stuff as he folds it up and chucks it inside. "The chest of drawers and the wardrobe aren't empty." Frowning, George pulls open the wardrobe, and he stares at the contents of the wardrobe. Inside is a messy pile of clothes Dudley had hated for whatever reason, as well as smaller toys and dishevelled packs of Pokémon trading cards. Dudley has asked for them, and they'd been bought for him, but the actual game proved to be too boring for him.

"I've heard of people having guest bedrooms," Fred says, leaning forwards and uncertainly giving a stuffed cat an uncertain poke. "But I've never heard of people having a second bedroom."

"Seems a bit unnecessary," George agrees.

"It's because he has so much stuff," Harry says, shaking his head as he pulls his trunk shut and latches it in place. "It just doesn't all fit in his bedroom."

"Your cousin?" Fred prompts, a slightly evil glint coming into his eye.

"Yeah," Harry answers, "And you're not meeting him." Fred's glint disappears, replaced with shining disappointment, but he doesn't bother to ask why Harry's not going to let him meet Dudley. Hedwig climbs neatly into her cage, settling herself in with a dignified ruffle of her feathers and a quiet hoot, and Harry hands her cage to George, but before he can lift up his trunk Fred takes it off the floor. "Fred, I can do that."

"Ah ah ah," George says scoldingly. "We're kidnapping you. That means we do the heavy lifting. You got all your stuff?"

"Yeah," Harry says, and as they come down the stairs, he sees Aunt Petunia in the hall, glaring at the Weasley twins with suspicion. "I'm going with Fred and George, so you guys can be rid of me. See you next summer."

"Hmph," is all Aunt Petunia says, and then she stalks off into the kitchen again. Harry puts out his hand for the Knight Bus, and he watches in excited awe as the bright purple monster of a vehicle comes roaring down the street. He'd seen the photos in An Introduction to The Wizarding World last year, but it's even more ridiculous in real life, and he grins at the conductor as they get on. Fred sets Harry's trunk down next to a brown armchair, but George keeps hold of Hedwig's cage.

"Back to the Burrow, if you would, Stan-my-man," Fred says brightly to the spotty conductor, who squints down at Harry. Harry is glad he hasn't had a haircut for a while - his hair covers his scar quite well.

"Who's that?" Stan demands.

"I'm Tom," Harry says with a straight face, ignoring Fred's snort as he drops himself onto a blue chaise long. The furniture on the Knight Bus is ridiculously mismatched, and as the bus roars fast along the winding roads, the chairs and sofas slide on the floor. It's fabulous, Harry decides.

"You a Muggle?" the conductor asks.

"Yeah," Harry says, "That's why I've got a wand in my hand, and why I'm not freaked out at all by the giant purple bus I'm on." The spotty conductor lets out an irritable huff of noise.

"Can't be too careful," he mutters, and he takes their sickles for the fare before walking down the bus.

"Bit of an idiot, isn't he?"

"Stan Shunpike, his name is," George says, "He was in the same year as Charlie. Charlie thought he was always a right pillock, mind. He was a Ravenclaw, but no one could ever figure out why." Harry laughs, holding tightly to the sides of his chair as it slides suddenly to the left.

"Thanks for this," Harry says seriously. "I think I would have gone mad if I'd been there any longer, not getting any post, and I've discovered why I'm not getting it, by the way. A house elf's been stealing it from me."

"What?" And with that, Harry tells them the whole strange conversation he'd had the night before, and the way the house elf had hurt himself, telling Harry he wasn't supposed to be there. By the time he's done with explaining what had happened, the three of them are stepping off the bus onto a dirt path, George carrying Harry's trunk and Fred cradling Hedwig's cage. Harry undoes it as they walk, and Hedwig flies out, circling in the air above them and stretching her wings.

"If he was hurting himself, he mustn't have had permission to be

there," George says, shifting the trunk in his hands. "That's weird, Harry, really weird. Ask Dad about it when we get in, though." They make their way up the hill slowly, and when the house comes into sight, Harry's even more delighted than he was upon seeing the workings of the Knight Bus. The magical world is endlessly exciting, but it's things like these that truly make Harry happy.

"Your house is amazing," Harry says immediately.

"Yeah, tell that to our mum," Fred says, "She keeps complaining about it." As soon as they're inside, George sets a bowl of food out for Hedwig, and Fred turns on the hob, heating up a pan. "Bacon sarnies, eh, lads?"

"You two are really domestic when you're not at school, aren't you?" Harry asks, and George whistles under his breath. "Cooking, feeding the owl. I bet you do your own washing."

"Firstly, you have to do your own washing in this house, else you end up coming down the stairs in nothing but one of Dad's socks, a pair of Ginny's knickers and a leather vest of Bill's," George says, pulling butter out of a cupboard and beginning to slice bread. "Secondly, you're not to brag about our housekeeping skills."

"All the boys will be trying to get us as trophy wives," Fred agrees gravely, "We want them to love us for our bodies, Potter, not our incredible charisma or ability to cook banquets."

"When have either of you ever cooked a banquet?" comes a voice from the doorway, and Harry looks to see Molly Weasley, her hands on her hips as she looks between the three of us.

"When have you ever let us?" Fred asks, brandishing his spatula like a weapon. "We'd do a marvellous job."

"A marvellous job of turning all the guests colours, I'd expect," Molly says, and Fred shrugs his shoulders.

"That's what a banquet's all about, Mum." Harry laughs, and Mrs Weasley looks at him properly, beaming down at him.

"There you are, Harry. Fred and George said they were inviting you down for the day." Harry stares at her for a second, mutely.

"We didn't actually say a day," George says, and Mrs Weasley's head whips to stare at her son. "We didn't specify any time-frame, Mum. You did that."

"And you wouldn't send Harry back to his aunt and uncle, would you?" Fred asks, putting a bacon sandwich on the table in front of Harry. "Look at him, Mum, he's skin and bones - they barely feed him, and they've got him in his cousin's second bedroom. They didn't even care that we were taking him."

"Now, you can't, George, Fred- do they- you did let them know you were going, didn't you, Harry?" Mrs Weasley asks anxiously.

"They were quite glad to see the back of me, to be honest, Mrs Weasley," Harry admits, "But I didn't realize - if I'm an imposition I can just-"

"Oh, don't be silly," she says firmly, her worry fading away like a Vanished teaspoon. "You could never be an imposition, Harry. Do eat up now. Fred is right: you do look a bit skinny." Harry meets Fred's eyes over Mrs Weasley's shoulder, and the older boy gives him a thumbs up and mouths, "_Spot on, Potter._"

* * *

><p>"Why do you never cook for me?" Ginny demands. She's still wearing a thick, pink dressing gown over some flannel pyjamas, and she crosses her arms tightly over her chest as she glares up at her older brother.<p>

"Because you don't eat enough vegetables," Fred answers, "You should be digging in the garden, biting into raw potatoes and gnomes, like a healthy young person. That's what I did."

"You didn't do that!"

"I did so. Ask Mum, she's got pictures somewhere."

"I was alive, you pillock, I'd have seen you!"

"Oh, no, I only did this in the dead of night, when you were asleep. The potatoes are asleep then."

"Potatoes don't sleep!"

"I meant the gnomes." George moves his queenside pawn, and Harry shakes his head as he tries to think of a way to respond.

"Are they always like that?" Harry asks. Ginny had come downstairs about ten minutes ago, and hasn't actually noticed Harry yet, much to his relief. Not that he has anything against her - he hasn't met her yet - but Fred and George had implied she was a bit overly in love with the idea of the Boy Who Lived. She'd asked Fred to make her a bacon sandwich, which he'd immediately and dramatically refused.

"Nah," George answers. "Fred only goes into abstract silliness when Ginny's trying to get him to do stuff. It gets right on her nerves, it does. He'll make her a sandwich once she gets angry enough to leave the room." Harry smiles, telling his kingside rook to move.

"Is it nice? Having siblings? I grew up with Dudley, obviously, but it's not the same." The same jealousy he'd felt when complimenting Hermione's parents makes itself obvious in the pit of Harry's stomach, and he thinks of all the photos he has of his family, all his family who're dead and gone. Would he have siblings, if his mum and dad had lived? Would he have had a little brother, or a little sister?

"It's always been a big household," George admits. "It was Bill, then Charlie, then Percy, then me and Fred, then Ron, then little Ginevra. There's benefits, and there's problems. For example, we could form our own all Weasley Quidditch team, but it's hard to get hot water in the morning. It's easy to ask for homework help from an older sibling, but most of the time the bastard won't give it

you."

"Speaking of homework help," Harry says, thinking of the Charms riddle, but George interrupts him.

"Oh, no, no, no. We're going to give you the full Weasley experience, Harry. You're the asker, I'm the bastard."

"Thanks, George," Harry says dryly.

"You're very welcome. Checkmate." Harry stares down at the board.

"Damn."

* * *

><p>"Hi, Ginny," Harry says later as they all sit outside around a few wooden tables, enjoying the sunshine. "I'm Harry." He puts out his hand for her to shake, and she stares at it, her eyes horrifically wide, but when Fred nudges her she shakes it, offering an awkward, shy smile. Then, she runs off and into the kitchen, ostensibly to help Mrs Weasley with something.<p>

"I shouldn't worry about it, Harry," Percy says, buttering his toast with an obsessive precision, "I think she's merely slightly awed by your, uh, celebrity, but she'll get used to it. She's horrible to the rest of us."

"That's true," Fred agrees. "She threw George down the stairs one summer when he threatened to cut off all her hair. The first bout of accidental magic we ever saw out of her, and she used it to try and kill one of us."

"Ah, that summer," George says, an expression of fond reminiscence on his face, "I still have the scars. She's a vicious girl, Harry. She'll come out of Hogwarts with severed heads, not trophies."

"You're not going to argue with that, Percy?" Harry asks lightly, and Percy looks up from his toast, apparently surprised to be addressed again. His smile is nice, Harry thinks, and he feels an odd twinge run through him as he watches the older boy draw his hand through his hair. In school, Percy is an officious perfectionist that barely ever talks to Harry if Hermione isn't present, but here he's an officious perfectionist who borders on friendly.

"Oh, I just have to hope none of the heads are mine, to be honest," Percy says lightly. "Of course, she won't be able to reach mine. Fred and George will have to buy step ladders." Fred gasps dramatically, clutching at his chest, and George does the same thing.

"You'd better not have been calling us short just now, Percival," George warns. "We'll kick you off the Quidditch team."

"I'm only on the Quidditch team as a favour to Oliver," Percy points out, pushing his glasses up his nose. "If you kick me out, it'll annoy him more than me." Fred sighs.

"He's right," he says mournfully. "The practices are bad enough as it

is." Mrs Weasley comes out of the kitchen with Ginny in tow, then, setting a dozen levitating bowls and plates down on the table, and Harry stares in excited awe at the different things she sets down. There are two pies, a salad, a steaming dish of potatoes-

"This looks great, Mrs Weasley," Harry says.

"Thank you, Harry," she says, and she sits beside Harry. They're all sat around two mismatched tables, and none of the chairs match either, but the Weasleys' garden is huge and bright and decorated all over with flowers, vegetable patches and ornaments, and it's nice to eat outside like this. Mr Weasley runs out of the house, and then he stops short, peering at the table. Harry can see his lips moving as he counts the children he sees, and he tries to keep from laughing as Mrs Weasley says, "We're missing Ron, dear." Mr Weasley goes back to the house, and Harry can hear him yelling Ron's name up the stairs.

"He's sulking because you're here," Fred supplies. "He thinks inviting a poor, orphaned Slytherin to stay with us is a betrayal."

"Fred!" Mrs Weasley says. "Don't call him that."

"It's alright, he calls me much worse things at school," Harry says innocently, and he pretends not to see Fred's look of indignation as Mrs Weasley glares at him even harder.

"Well, you don't mind staying in Ron's room, do you, Harry?"

"Er-"

"Don't worry, Mum," George breaks in. "We've already cleared a space and put the spare bed for Harry in ours." Harry feels relief warm through him. He hopes Ron will calm down a little this summer, without Seamus and Dean to back him up, but he doesn't want to share a bedroom with him for the time being.

Ron lopez out of the house, sitting at the table next to Ginny, and Harry frowns at him. "Have you gotten taller?" he asks, trying not to sound as personally offended as he feels.

"Yeah," Ron replies, and George pats Harry's head.

"Don't worry, Harry. Maybe you'll be as tall as Flitwick one day."

"Shall we start?" Arthur says hurriedly, and Harry shakes George's hand off his hair, reaching for a piece of chicken.

* * *

><p>"And this house elf's name was Dobby?" Arthur asks, scribbling down a messy note to himself on a piece of parchment. There's a deep, serious frown on his features, and he'd listened very carefully when Harry had explained the whole thing.<p>

"Do you have like, a registry?" Harry asks, and Arthur shakes his head.

"No, the magical census only takes names of non-humanoid beings living in households, and house elves aren't registered at birth or death," Arthur says, shaking his head, "But I can ask some questions, and there are registries of house elf owners, with how many house elves they have in their possession."

"But he wasn't there on orders," Harry points out, "He kept hurting himself, punishing himself."

"I'm afraid house elves are only really thought about in relation to their owners, Harry," Arthur says quietly, giving a helpless shrug of his shoulders. "But I'll see about having someone get your post back for you, alright?" He gently pats Harry's shoulder, and Harry offers the other man a small smile.

"Thanks, Mr Weasley."

That night, Harry lies on the bed to the side of the room, listening to the quiet chatter of Fred and George as they pour over a set of books a complicated set of notes Harry doesn't even try to understand. So used as he is to the noise of the television downstairs as he tries to sleep, their conversation lulls him into an easy sleep.

24. Year Two: The Mysterious Appeal of Percy

While rescuing Harry from the Dursleys had been Fred and George's idea, by no means did it mean the two of them were going to sit about and entertain him all day. They welcomed Harry into their room and would explain concepts they were experimenting with if he asked about them, but getting one answer almost always meant he had three new questions to ask, and so Harry had gracefully ducked out of watching their experimentation.

Using everything from potions ingredients to hand-picked flowers to stray hair off the family cat, Fred and George seem intent on discovering everything they can over the summer, apparently for fun. It's the sort of complex work that Theodore Nott would enjoy, but it isn't Harry's thing at all, and the twins don't find his disinterest rude. Ginny spends all her time either locked in her room, away from Harry, or in the village, away from Harry; Ron staunchly ignores him if Harry looks at him, and Percy...

Well, Harry likes Percy, but Percy can be very, very dull. At the moment, he's working hard on A History of Magic essay, and he'll talk about his premise to anyone who gets too close.

So, for the time being, Harry helps Mrs Weasley downstairs. He runs errands for her, brings in the laundry, helps her do the dishes - as much as Mrs Weasley uses magic around the house, she always seems to have forty tasks to complete at one time. Harry is sat at the little table in the Burrow's kitchen, organizing Mrs Weasley's numerous recipe cards by main ingredient. Apparently, the last time she'd had a chance to perform this task had been 1981, and she'd added a lot of cards to it since.

"How did you start out sending letters, Harry?" She asks, and Harry glances up.

"I actually wrote you first," he says, stacking another card in the lamb pile. "But I'd read in my book, An Introduction To The Wizarding World, that writing letters was good, so I basically sent out several. People who'd gone to school with my parents, or people I'd seen in the paper. I didn't expect as many people to write me back as they did." Molly smiles down at him, looking fond as she folds up a pair of startlingly orange pyjamas emblazoned with the Chudley Cannons logo.

"Have you read your Prophet this morning, love?" Harry shakes his head, "Well, there's a letter to the editor about the youth of today you might like to have a look at." Mrs Weasley turns the radio up a bit, and Harry listens to Celestina Warbeck warble as he scans recipe cards and sets them aside in neat piles. She's alright, he thinks, but she's no Michael Jackson.

* * *

><p>TO THE EDITOR,

_Last week, one of the columns in this paper discussed
the_

_tendency of our children in these times to purchase
for_

_themselves cats and kneazles instead of owls, (as well
as_

mentioning the resurgence of the pet toad), and their

_lacking attention in regard to the tradition of writing
letters._

_It has been my sad understanding in recent years that
young_

_wizards, witches and like have drawn away from the art
and_

_craftsmanship of the letter. Oh, yes, they will send off their
owl_

_order forms and the occasional note on a birthday, but it
seems_

_they have abandoned letter-writing as common practice
for_

_contacting friends and relatives, and most of all for forging
new_

_contacts in the wizarding world. It was a fact I had - morosely
-_

taken fully into my head.

_These days, with Floo Powder more readily available
and_

_affordable than ever before now that the War is done with,
I_

_falsely believed that I would never receive a letter from
a_

person below the age of 20 again.

In the past year, I have been proved quite wrong.

A young person in attendance at Hogwarts wrote me a letter

_in September, asking a very simple question: had I known
his_

parents before the War?

_Indeed, I had, as I had known many of the children we lost
in_

those dark times, even as those children became adults and

_had families of their own. I felt the loss of those children
as_

keenly as I felt that of my own son and daughter-in-law, and

so I shared with this young man what I could - an anecdote,

a few photographs.

_Little did I know that he would be so polite and focused on
his_

_epistolary as to write me back, each week, with such a
pleasant,_

polite tone and such legible (if not pretty) handwriting. In

this man, I see the devotion, the focus, and the willingness

_to hold up tradition I should hope to see in any
new_

generation.

_I submit that the writing of letters has lost some of its
old_

splendour, but I disagree with the idea that epistolary is a

dead art: one young man renewed my hope in this regard, and

for that I am most grateful.

Yours,

Augusta Longbottom

Harry stares down at the page. Usually, he throws away his copy of the Prophet upon reading it, but he sits for a long time on top of his bed in Fred and George's bedroom, reading through the printed lines again and again. When Mrs Longbottom writes to him, she usually comes across as stern, normally ordering Harry to read this book or attempt this technique, but he's read a letter where she writes like this. The letter to the editor fills him with a warmth that settles in his chest, and he only feels more of a loss for the letters Dobby is keeping back from him.

"Hey, George," Harry asks quietly, "Have you guys got some something to cut this out?" George hands Harry a set of Muggle scissors with WOOLWORTHS emblazoned on them, and Harry meticulously cuts the letter out, reaching for the small, brown box in which he keeps all of the photos different people had sent him of his family to place it inside.

It's not a precious photo, but it's a precious something, and Harry wants to keep it forever.

* * *

><p>"I'm just going into the village to call Hermione, Mrs Weasley," Harry says, pulling his Weasley jumper over his head. It's the second time he'll be going down into the village, this time on his own, but walking through Ottery St Catchpole is nothing like it is in Little Whinging. People even smile at him as he walks past. "Do you need me to get you anything?"<p>

"You don't need Muggle money for the telephone?" she prompts, frowning at him.

"I've got some, it's alright," Harry assures her. He'd sent a letter to Hermione already, telling her he hadn't received any post yet, but also about his relocation to the Weasleys'.

"If you could just take that basket up to Percy before you go?" Harry glances to the left, and then he grasps at the sides of the wicker washing basket, carrying it quickly up the stairs to Percy's bedroom, and he knocks on the door, balancing the basket on his hip.

"Come in," Percy calls through the door, and Harry pushes the door open, holding up the basket for the older boy to take, but then he stops short in the doorway. Half of Percy's face is covered with a light layer of thick, white shaving cream, and he's using a razor to shave the little bits of ginger stubble growing in on his cheeks and his chin - a Muggle plastic razor, Harry notices, not like Mr Weasley's old-fashioned folding blade. Percy shaves himself in the mirror above the basin in his bedroom, but it's not the shaving that makes Harry stop breathing.

Percy isn't wearing a shirt. Percy Weasley isn't lightly tanned or lightly toned, like the male models Harry'd seen on the covers of Muggle magazines Aunt Petunia always tutted at in Tesco, and nor is his skin clear. Freckles heavily dapple the skin on his arms and his shoulders, and a few of them are visible where his pyjama bottoms hang around his waist, just under his hips. Harry feels a funny twist in his belly, and he feels himself turning red as he drops Percy's basket on the floor. "Going into the village," Harry says awkwardly. "See you later."

He slams the door shut behind him, leaving Percy staring with puzzlement at the door, and he runs down the stairs.

* * *

><p>"So, yeah, if you just ask Mrs Weasley about using her fireplace to come in the morning... I mean, unless you'd rather go with the Weasleys?"<p>

"Nah," Harry says, shaking his head and dropping another 10p piece into the coin slot of the telephone. "Mr and Mrs Weasley said I was welcome to come, but I feel like they're really stressed out about going out with Fred, George, Ginny and Ron in tow, let alone adding me to the group as well, so I figure I'll just stay here and get some reading done. I think Mrs Weasley trusts Percy not to burn the house down with me in it." He hears Hermione laugh, and he leans against the wall of the telephone box, staring up at its plastic ceiling. "Hermione," he says quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think that Percy's- you know. Attractive?" There's a long pause as Hermione takes in the question and digests it. Harry drums his fingers on the side of his leg.

"Not really," Hermione answers, sounding a bit puzzled. "The twins are much better looking, especially George."

"Especially George, eh?" Harry repeats, "I'll tell him that."

"Oh, shut up," Hermione says, "But Percy's not bad-looking." She seems quick to assure him of that, and Harry smiles a little at how earnest she is - she just wants him to feel normal about it, and it's nice. Hermione's a good friend.

"No," Harry agrees, "He's not."

* * *

><p>Harry frowns to himself as he makes his way up towards the Burrow again, thinking to himself. In his hand, he holds a paper bag of sweet letters, and his gaze is concentrated on the ground as he tries to think of what he needs from Diagon Alley and Muggle London tomorrow. He'll have to write down a proper list once he's inside - he'll only end up forgetting half of it, otherwise.<p>

"Harry Potter, sir," says a squeaky voice as he enters the Weasleys' garden, and Harry whips around, staring with wide eyes at the house elf stood on Mrs Weasley's well-trodden garden path.

"Dobby!" he hisses.

"Harry Potter must not return to Hogwarts this year," Dobby says plaintively, stamping one of his little feet onto the ground. Harry's gaze flickers towards the door to the Burrow, which is barely seven feet away, and Harry wonders how fast he could run that distance.

Harry sighs, running his hand through his hair, and then says,

"Fine." Dobby's ears perk up.

"Yes?" he says, tennis ball eyes shining with hope and relief.

"If you give me all my letters, right now, I won't go back to Hogwarts," Harry says gravely. "I'll write a letter to Beauxbatons right now, and ask to go there." Dobby beams at him, looking as if Christmas has come early. That is- well. House elves probably don't get to celebrate Christmas, but still. Dobby conjures a wooden box which is open on top, and Harry stares at the letters inside, nestled with a few parcels, each tied neatly with twine. Dobby stole them, but he treated them very carefully.

"Harry Potter promises he won't go back to Hogwarts?"

"Harry Potter promises no such thing," Harry replies, and he sprints as fast as he can into the Burrow, yelling to Mrs Weasley about the house elf in the garden as if it's the worst thing imaginable.

And given how Dobby's been withholding post with even more focus and strategy than Uncle Vernon over Harry's Hogwarts letter, it sort of is.

25. Year Two: Diagon Alley

"Merlin's saggy ballsack, Harry," George exclaims.

"George!" Molly scolds him, but George ignores her completely, staring with Fred at Harry's box of letters. Harry doesn't even know where to start with it - he feels even better than he had at Christmas last year, with so many letters to reply to, different hand-writing his name on the envelopes and different sorts of twine tying the notes together.

"How do you organize it all?" Fred asks, looking horrified at all the post.

"I just keep it in a box at the moment," Harry admits, "I'm going to buy some files when I go into Diagon Alley this week. Is it still alright if I go with the Grangers on Friday, Mrs Weasley?"

"Oh, of course, dear," Mrs Weasley says, obviously trying not to show her relief at not leading Harry around Diagon Alley as well as everyone else. "And the rest of us will go on Sunday." Harry smiles at her, and he walks into the living room, sitting down on the floor with some parchment, his quills and some ink.

He starts with the tied notes, first. Two are from Hagrid asking how his summer's going, and the rest are just from people in his year. He picks out the three parcels, then: one of them is from Honeydukes for a packet of sugar quills he'd forgotten he'd ordered, and another is a new Slytherin scarf. The third one isn't something he'd ordered, though - it's a small, wooden box, and inside is a set of training snitches, nestled with a broom-polishing kit and a set of Seeker's gloves. Harry frowns at the contents, and then he picks out the letter attached.

Dear Mr Potter,
_

You do not know us, but you do know our daughters, Padma
and Parvati. Padma shared with us the details of what happened
_at Hogwarts during the first Quidditch match of the season.
We_
_have been informed as to how the stand began to crumble
beneath_
_you, and how you pushed her back, focusing on getting her to
safety_
before you focused on yourself.
_We were obviously grateful and relieved, and when Padma
returned_
_from Hogwarts this year and we went to Diagon Alley for her
and_
_Parvati's school things, she expressed the desire to buy
something_
for you as a token of her gratitude.
_Enclosed is a training Seeker's set - Parvati tells us you're quite
the_
_devil on a broom, Mr Potter, and while you may not wish to join
your_
_house team (so our daughters hope, lest you win Slytherin the
cup),_
we hope you might enjoy their use.
Yours truly,
Ajit & Rachna Patil

Harry stares down at the page, utterly taken aback, and Percy comes into the room, peering down at him.

"What's wrong?" Harry wordlessly hands him the letter, and as Percy holds the parchment in his hands, reading through the neatly looping lines of script, Harry touches the three snitches in the box. One is half regulation size, and the other gets faster the closer the seeker gets to catching it. The third is a normal snitch, just like you'd use in a real Quidditch match.

"Oh, that's nice of them," Percy says, handing the letter back. "Have you got a broom?" he asks, pointing to the polishing kit, and Harry shakes his head.

"I thought I might get one this year," Percy nods his head approvingly, and he sits down on the sofa, picking up a book and making no more effort as to conversation. Harry sets the Patils' letter aside to reply to first, and then he begins to read through the letters in envelopes. He's distracted as he goes, though, and he

keeps glancing back to the Seeker's kit, overwhelmed with gratitude.

He can't believe they'd been so nice.

* * *

><p>"Now, just drop in the Floo powder and step into the flames. Make sure you speak clearly now, Harry," Mr Weasley coaches him. "We don't want you ending up in the French quarter of Dublin."<p>

"Is that likely to happen?"

"Probably not, probably not-" Mr Weasley says hurriedly, and Harry shakes his head, throwing down the Floo powder before stepping into the green flames.

"The Leaky Cauldron!" Harry says loudly, and he keeps his elbows in just as Mr Weasley had told him, closing his eyes tightly until he stumbles out of the fireplace. He falls on the floor without any grace at all, his glasses flying over the tile, and he groans as Tom Darcy, the barman, picks them up.

"First time in the Floo, eh, Harry?" he asks lightly, and Harry nods his head, pulling himself up and taking his glasses back. "You'll get better at it. Want me to take a look at that graze?" Harry glances at his right arm, which he'd dragged over the floor on his way down, and sighs.

"Yeah, please, Tom," he says, and when the Grangers come into the pub, Harry is sat at the bar, holding his arm out and letting Tom rub a healing balm that knits the torn skin together, leaving it warm to the touch but intact.

"What did you do?" Hermione asks, concern obvious.

"Oh, he just fell getting out of the Floo, lass," Tom says, "Happens all the time." Tom assures her, and Harry smiles at him, getting down from the stool. "Have a good time."

"Thanks, Tom," Harry says, and with the Grangers, they move into Diagon Alley. They go to Gringotts first, and Harry gets some money out of his vault while the Grangers exchange some Muggle notes for Galleons. Rather than returning straight to the high street, the Grangers let Harry and Hermione lead them into some of the side streets, so they can go through some of the secondhand shops.

Harry is careful to read over the signs over the doors before they go into any of them: he doesn't want to end up going in a shop full of dark magic implements, but for the most part he's aware those shops are in Knockturn Alley, which they're careful to avoid.

Harry and Hermione spends much of the morning exploring the shops, picking up cheap books in their scores, and Harry even finds a few leather photo albums for his pictures. "Oh, Harry, look!" Hermione says at around eleven o'clock. Harry glances away from the enchanted letter box he'd been musing over, coming over. On the shelf, slightly battered but still in their boxes, are three complete sets of Gilderoy Lockhart's complete works.

"Excuse me," Hermione calls across the room, where a pretty older woman, Dawn, is talking with Mr and Mrs Granger, "How much are these?"

"4 knuts apiece," she replies easily, "10 for the three sets together."

"One for you, one for me, one as a present for Ginny?" Harry asks, and Hermione vigorously nods her head, picking up the three boxes and lugging them - not with too much ease - to the glass cashier desk. Harry peers at the letter box a few moments more, and then he picks it up. He sets it on the table, too, but then he stops short.

"Sorry," he asks, "Is that a Cleansweep Six?"

"Yeah," Dawn says, nodding her head and glancing at the broom for a moment before she picks it up, passing it over the desk for Harry to have a look at. "Still works just fine, of course - it's just a bit outdated." This seems to go completely over the Grangers' head, but Harry will explain it later, over lunch. The Cleansweep range is reliable, and even though it's probably a bit of money to spend, it is an investment.

Besides, it's not like he can spend all of his school money on the Nimbus 2001 he'd seen in the window of Quality Quidditch Supplies.

"How much?" Harry asks, and Dawn smiles at him. Harry smiles right back.

* * *

><p>"Merlin's beard," Harry says as he stops outside of Flourish and Blotts as they exit, and Hermione glances at him quizzically, but he points at the sign tacked up to the inside of the glass, advertising Gilderoy Lockhart's book signing on Sunday.<p>

"God," Hermione agrees, "7 Sickles for the whole set, and on sale. We got a really good deal."

"Not the price," Harry says impatiently, "He wrote me a letter."

"Lockhart did?" Hermione asks.

"Yeah. I didn't realize what his name was, to be honest - he has this big flowy signature, but it's that one," Harry says, jabbing his finger at the gold inked G. Lockhart signed on the portrait photo of Lockhart in the window.

"A famous author's writing you, Harry," Mr Weasley says, waggling his eyebrows, "You truly are reaching high places." Harry laughs, shaking his head, and he thinks about the letter Gilderoy Lockhart had sent him. "A famous author's writing you, Harry," Mr Weasley says, waggling his eyebrows, "You truly are reaching high places." Harry laughs, shaking his head, and he thinks about the letter Gilderoy Lockhart had sent him. Now he knows what the man's name is, he'll be able to reply.

The letter had been arrogant nonsense, of course, so he doesn't know if he wants to.

26. Year Two: Chaos At King's Cross

_Dear Harry, _

_I do hope I can call you Harry, can't I? _

Harry stares down at Lockhart's letter, lips twisting. It feels presumptuous and rude in a way that Harry can't quite define, but all of Lockhart's letters are written in a breezy, self-satisfied way that clearly imply who is, and should be, the centre of the universe.

_I've heard you're quite the little letter-writer, and I _

_thought I'd gift you with a letter of my own - perhaps _

_you might keep this one, and look back on it fondly _

_in a few years! _

_In the coming year, I will be coming to teach Defence _

_Against The Dark Arts at Hogwarts - do keep it under _

_your hat, of course! - and I merely wanted to extend _

_my most HUMBLE offer of tutelage in advance, should _

_you like to take some benefit of my expertise. _

_I'm sure once you're all grown up, we might work in the _

_same field, you and I - perhaps we might even do an _

_interview together! _

_Looking forward to meeting you, _

_G. Lockhart. _

At least, that is what Harry now knows the signature is meant to say: in actuality, it's an unrecognizable swirl of G and L, followed by a scribble that's supposed to be the missing "ockhart".

"I don't want to reply," he says, putting his forehead to the wood of the kitchen table and hoping irrationally that the letter will just go away. "It's so- it's such a weird letter to send, and he's obviously a tosser." Fred puts out his hand, and he and George read it together.

"Definite tosser," they agree together, and without any more pageantry, Fred scrunches up the piece of parchment and throws it in the fireplace. "If he asks, your post was stolen by a house elf, and you didn't get that one back," he suggests. Harry watches the parchment scrunch further, blackening at the edges, and it makes him feel better to see it burn.

"Yeah," George agrees. "Obviously Dobby was so desperate to touch something written by Gilderoy Lockhart he kept it, and he sleeps with as a bedsheet each night. Come on, get up, you lazy snake. Let's go play Quidditch."

"Us and you versus Percy, Ron and Ginny," Fred agrees, and Harry's decision is made up easily: he stoppers his ink bottle and pulls on his gloves to play.

"Are you sure we're all going to fit in a Ford Anglia, Mr Weasley?" Harry asks skeptically, and he pats Harry's back, giving him a wink.

"Oh, yes, Harry," he says, nodding his head, and he picks up Harry's trunk to put in the car first. Harry watches, fascinated, as Mr Weasley slides the trunk inside - the car is enchanted to have a ridiculous amount of space on the inside, and he grins. "Now, you're not to share about the car around school, alright? It's, ah, not strictly legal." Harry suppresses the urge to snicker.

"It's okay, Mr Weasley. I cover illegal stuff for Fred and George all the time."

"Oh, good," Arthur says, and then, "Wait, Harry, what-"

"I'll be right back, Mr Weasley!" Harry interrupts brightly, and he heads into the house. It's a little past half eight, and Ron and Percy are eating their breakfasts (with varying degrees of accuracy, judging by the red sauce on Ron's shirt collar) as everyone else runs back and forth. Treacle, the Weasley's ill-tempered tabby, is running around the house with a black jumper on, and Harry can only assume that it's Ginny's, given that she's in pursuit. Fred and George are on their hands and knees in front of the fireplace, both of their heads shoved into the flames as they talk loudly and quickly with someone on the other side.

In the midst of the chaos, Mrs Weasley leans against the kitchen side, drinking her tea and apparently doing her best to ignore everything going on around her. "Would you start taking everyone's trunks outside for me, Harry dear? Just leave Ginny's for now: she's trying to find her jumper." Harry watches as Treacle desperately flees upstairs, Ginny scrambling after her.

"Okay," Harry assents, and he drags Percy's trunk out to Mr Weasley.

"Come on, let's get onto the platform," Percy says briskly, adjusting his prefect badge where it stands proudly on his chest, pinned to a red jumper. He couldn't be more irritating in this moment than if he clapped his hands. "Ginny, you first."

"Yes, sir!" Ginny says, rolling her eyes, and she runs forwards, hitting the wall with a loud, harsh smack of sound. She lets out a cry of pain, and Percy and George run forwards, pulling her up. A graze bleeds a little on her left arm, and she'd hit her jaw hard as she'd fallen down, cutting the skin.

Muggles are glancing at Weasleys, and Harry sees Mr and Mrs Weasley share an uncertain look: they're a big family anyway, but given all

their trunks and the owls they've got with them as well, they don't really look all that mundane. Arthur moves forwards as George and Percy pull Ginny towards Mrs Weasley. She's crying a little bit - not out of pain, Harry doesn't think, but just at the sudden shock of hitting the wall instead of passing through it.

Harry recognizes people coming into the station, some of them in clothes like the Weasleys are wearing, but others in full-on robes.

"Merlin's beard," Arthur whispers as he comes away from the wall between the two platforms. "Molly, we need to go."

"What? But we have to catch the express--"

"The enchantment on the wall's been dispelled," Arthur says, "Look, take your owls, and go outside. Percy, I need you to take the children to the Leaky Cauldron, and if you see other Hogwarts students as you go around, tell them to do the same. I need to go to the Ministry. Molly--"

"I'll stay here," she says, nodding her head, "And point people to the Leaky Cauldron. What do you think's going on here?"

"I don't know," Arthur admits, "But it's nothing good. Go on, Percy, take them now." Percy steps back, and all of them follow him, too surprised to do anything else. George carries Hermes, Percy's owl, and Harry holds Hedwig carefully as they walk on.

"Come on, now, there's hardly anything to worry about," Percy says briskly, but not convincingly. He talks quickly and quietly with the parents he sees as they move out of the station, and by the time they're walking through London it isn't just the six of them but Daphne Greengrass, looking as icy as ever, Francis Drummond, who seems to be hoping that fifth year is the year he ceases to exist, and Dean Thomas, who talks quietly and concernedly with Ron.

"Has this happened before?" Harry asks. Fred and George's faces are solemn, and they shake their heads.

"Dad said one time King's Cross was attacked, during the war, but everyone could still get to the platform and get on the train. What time is it, half-ten? Basically everyone would have been going in right now, so this is a proper mess," Fred says.

"Oi!" George says. "Lee!" A black boy lugging his trunk on one shoulder turns, and he sees them, waving. "Come here, you idiot!" Lee Jordan runs over, and Harry can't help but laugh a little at the picture of it, the way he holds his trunk so easily - the Muggles must all think it's empty.

"Daphne, you okay?" Harry asks, and she gives a small incline of her head.

"I could perhaps be better," she admits. "Given that I'm currently following the leadership of a Weasley." Harry decides not to respond to that, and they walk in silence until they get to the Leaky Cauldron - Percy ushers them all in, and one inside, he stops short, as if faced with his true nemesis.

"Prefect Lanjwani!"

"Prefect Weasley," Afifa returns, arching an eyebrow. "Slytherins, with me. Gryffindors, stay with Prefect Weasley. You, first year Weasley, you stay with your brother too." She turns back to Percy and says, "We're splitting into houses for the moment, and Mr Darcy's letting us all wait in an event room. I believe your father is currently spreading the word, but this is chaos, Weasley, I don't know what we're going to do to get to the school." Percy inhales, shaking his head.

"Is Penelope here?"

"Clearwater? Yeah, she's downstairs in the room. Come on." Afifa and Percy talk in a quiet, urgent tone: there's none of the usual house rivalry or jabbing back and forth, and that fills Harry with more trepidation than anything else. He sees Hermione sat on her trunk to the side of the room, and he comes over, sitting beside her.

They sit in silence for a long while - Harry doesn't want to speculate, not when there's a thick, worried ball in his belly and the clock is ticking towards eleven o'clock. When Afifa and Percy walk past them again, Harry catches their attention.

"Afifa?" Harry asks, and they both turn, looking down at him and Hermione.

"Yes?"

"They'll be able to get it fixed, won't they? We're still going to be able to catch the Express?" Afifa presses her lips together, glancing at Percy, who shakes his head.

"You've read Hogwarts: A History, haven't you?" Percy asks, and Harry and Hermione nod their heads. "Do you recall the passage as to the safety of the Hogwarts Express? It leaves at its exact time, and can't be stopped or slowed. It leaves at its exact time, and can't be stopped or slowed from leaving the station. It can take emergency stops en route, but not here in London. Besides, there's no possible way Ministry workers can replace the enchantments to reach the platform whilst Muggles are using the station as usual - it would cause utter chaos."

"We'll still get you all to Hogwarts," Afifa says, "But it won't be on the train." Hermione drums her fingers on her own knees as they walk away.

"What's going on, do you think?" she asks Harry, and he shakes his head. The room is full of anxious Hogwarts students, each talking quietly with each other - no one is laughing or joking, and even Fred, George and Lee are settled to the very edge of the wall, talking very seriously to each other.

"Whatever it is," Harry says, "It can't be good."

27. Year Two: The Lockhart Problem

"Quiet down!" says McGonagall as she enters the room, and the hush that spreads through the students gathered in the huge event room is

sudden: almost immediately they're all turning to look uncertainly to Professor McGonagall, who looks like she's had a difficult day so far. It's nearing twelve o'clock, and most of them are all sat down on the floor or on top of their trunks, talking together. "Ministry workers are currently restoring the wall at King's Cross - you've missed the train, but you'll be able to catch it next year."

"How are we going to get to school this year?"

"Five points from Gryffindor, Mr Jordan."

"We're not even there yet!"

"Ten points." Lee Jordan dramatically gasps, looking more indignant than honestly offended. "To answer Mr Jordan's question, we're currently awaiting a license for Professor Flitwick to create portkeys for you to reach the castle."

"Why can't we just Apparate to Hogsmeade?" asks a seventh year Ravenclaw.

"Those of you with Apparition licenses may Apparate to Hogsmeade, if you so choose, but we cannot sidealong Apparate with so many people in so short a time. Moreover," McGonagall says, cutting through the next expected interruption, "There are only a few fireplaces connected to the Floo Network, and as all four of them are in the private quarters of Hogwarts staff members, none of them will be used."

"Are you sure? I'd like to see Snape's bedroom!" George says, making people laugh around the room.

"Professor Snape," McGonagall says loudly, "Does not have a Floo connection, Mr Weasley, but I will pass on your regards." There are a few scattered laughs around the room, but her momentary good humour fades away, and McGonagall glances around the room, her expression sober. "First years will still experience their traditional arrival by boat, and the coaches will be waiting for the rest of you at the Hogwarts gates, once you make your way in. The Hogwarts house elves will be bringing you your lunch soon. If all prefects could come forwards and tell me which students are missing from the register."

Harry sighs, rubbing at his eyes. He and Hermione sit together on her trunk, cross-legged and back to back, and Harry can feel the thick cushion of her hair against the back of his neck. Beside them, Hedwig perches on top of her cage. Harry had let her out an hour ago, but she'd elected to stay rather than flying onto the castle.

"Do you think I'll ever get to have a normal year at school?" Hermione asks.

"Not as long as you're friends with me," Harry promises, and she laughs a little. "I wonder if Mr Weasley got all our trunks to the school yet."

"Probably. But it's not like we can commandeer the Knight Bus for the morning."

"Why not?" Harry asks.

"Because, Harry," Hermione says, "We're in the wizarding world now. Besides, they did that before for a big Ministry event, didn't they? It was in Ministerial Insight, and instead of going to London they ended up in the middle of the Irish Sea." Harry thinks of the spotty, stupid conductor he'd met on the Knight Bus. It makes complete sense, even if he doesn't remember the particular part in the book.

* * *

><p>Harry groans as he lets go of the portkey, and Theodore Nott pats his back as they pass the used portkey to Hagrid, who is collecting them all in a wide, wicker basket. Harry's navel feels like it's approximately six feet away from his body right now, and it's not at all a pleasant sensation.<p>

The portkeys had been organized for groups of no more than five, and Harry had gone with Theodore, Blaise, Crabbe and Goyle.

"They're not my favourite either," Nott says lightly, and Harry breathes in, standing up straight. The sensation soon fades, and Harry shakes his head, glancing around for the carriages, but then he stops short as he watches a girl appear with some other Ravenclaws, laughing. She tosses back her hair, which is black and glossy, and Harry finds himself stopped short, staring at her.

"Uh, Harry?" Blaise prompts, and Harry tears his gaze away, feeling the same strange twinge he had when he'd seen Percy shirtless at the Burrow.

"Who's that girl? The Ravenclaw?" Blaise rolls his eyes, and Theodore shakes his head, shoving Harry towards the carriages.

"That's Cho Chang, you idiot. She's the Seeker for the Ravenclaw team."

"She's pretty," Harry says awkwardly as he climbs into the carriage, and the other two boys shake their heads exasperatedly as Crabbe and Goyle pull themselves up too. "Don't you think?"

"Sure," Blaise says, "But none of us are staring at her with our mouths wide open like a peasant looking upon a noblewoman of old."

* * *

><p>When they arrive in the castle, it's four o'clock, and there are about thirty students on the Hogwarts Express for the rest of them to wait for. After changing into his robes, Harry makes his way towards the staircases to go and find Hermione, but is stopped short with a loud, joyous, "Harry!"<p>

Harry turns his head, staring in honest disbelief at the man before him. Gilderoy Lockhart is a little under six feet, his blond hair styled into a boyish set of curls that don't really suit him; his teeth are whiter than ivory, and he wears a positively luminescent set of bright purple robes, their lining made of an extravagant pink.

"Sorry, sir," Harry says hurriedly, "I'm not Harry, I-"

"Nonsense!" Lockhart proclaims delightedly, clapping Harry on the back. "So good to finally meet you, young man! I sent you a letter, of course, but no doubt you were too shy to respond."

"Uh, no," Harry says, "A lot of my post was nicked over the summer. I guess I never got it."

"Ah, no trouble, no trouble - you see, Harry, I merely wished to offer you a position as my mentee, my protégé, if you will," Lockhart says flamboyantly, tossing his hair.

"I'll have to think about it," Harry says, and before Lockhart can say anything else he runs into the next room, making his way as quickly as he can up to the Fat Lady to ask for Hermione.

* * *

><p>"Well," Harry says as he drops face-first onto his bed, half-heartedly kicking off his shoes. "That was a disaster."<p>

"It didn't go well, did it?" Draco agrees, untying the fastenings of his robes as frowning deeply. "Who do you think was behind the thing at the train station?"

"Don't know. Seems a bit low-key for Voldemort."

"Harry!" Draco hisses.

"Sorry, sorry. Seems a bit low-key for You-Know-You," Harry corrects himself, feeling more than silly. Hermione won't say the name herself, but at least she doesn't flinch every time he says it. "Maybe it was people protesting the use of a Muggle railway station? I don't know, it just seems random." Dumbledore had reiterated that the platform would be just fine next year, and that the Hogwarts Express had ran just fine, but he had just said some unknown party had caused the trouble, and that the Ministry was searching for the culprit. "They must have been powerful."

"Yeah," Draco agrees, pulling on his pyjama top as Harry begins to change into his own night clothes. "That'll probably be the end of it, though. It's not like they killed anyone."

"That doesn't mean they didn't mean to," Harry replies darkly, and he brushes the spine of Catastrophes of the Recent Past, which he'd unpacked with the rest of his books earlier that afternoon. It's one of the books Athene Greengrass had sent him vouchers for last year, and he thinks he'll re-read a little of it tonight. He's read most of Lockhart's books, which are vapid but simply written, and he doesn't want to subject himself to the last two just yet. "D'you think he'll be a good teacher? Lockhart?"

"My parents think he's useless," Draco answers, shrugging his shoulders, "But Father still sponsored his appearance at Flourish and Blotts."

"That's about money," Harry says, "Why would Lucius let him come to Hogwarts if he thinks he'll be useless?" Harry asks, setting his shoes under the bed.

"He's a governor, Harry, not a God."

"Tell him that," Harry retorts, and Draco throws a pillow at him, making Harry laugh as he catches it.

"It's hard to get Defence Against The Dark Arts teachers here," Draco says, "They say the position's jinxed." He puts out his hands and catches his pillow as Harry throws it back. "Maybe he's hoping Lockhart will get killed."

"You don't sell the cash cow for beef, Draco," Harry replies. Draco stares at him.

"What?" Harry laughs, lying down on the bed. "I wish you wouldn't use all these ridiculous expressions."

"Good night, Draco," Harry says, blowing out his candle. "Don't let the bed bugs bite."

Draco's pillow, this time, hits him in the back of the head, and Harry refuses to give it back.

28. Year Two: Snakes and Whispers

"I know he's a bit, well, arrogant, but look at all the things he did in his books!" Hermione says, looking absently at the animated image of Gilderoy Lockhart on the cover of *Magical Me*, which she'd apparently ordered by owl. The collected sets they'd bought hadn't included the autobiography, a new publication, and frankly, Harry is glad. If he owned a copy, he'd feel obligated to read it.

"He hasn't taught us anything yet, though," Harry maintains, "And he's so self-centred. Hermione. If Professor McGonagall set a bloody test asking us her favourite colour and what sort of knickers she likes, we'd be out in a second."

"He never asked us what sort of knickers he likes," Hermione argues, looking horrified at the very thought, "That's not fair."

"You just think he's attractive, that's the only reason-"

"That's not the only reason!"

"It's the only reason! You see his lovely hair and his pretty face and you just swoon-"

"I've never swooned in my life, Harry, and I'm not about to-" There's a quiet cough, and Hermione and Harry irritably turn around. Draco has his hands in his pockets, and is looking casually at the both of them. If he wanted to look any more innocent, he'd probably start whistling, and Harry glares at him. Even if Draco isn't showing it, it's obvious he's amused at having found Harry and Hermione arguing about something.

"Sorry to interrupt your heated discussion," Draco says in an oily voice, "But I want some help with the Lockhart homework."

"Define help," Hermione says, raising her eyebrows and crossing her arms over her chest.

"I want the answers," Draco says, and Hermione tuts at him.

"I'm not going to help you cheat," she says disapprovingly, shaking her head, but Harry considers this, leaning his elbow on the table and looking at Draco thoughtfully. If it were usual homework help, Harry would just help him out, but giving Draco the answers to Lockhart's new test won't stop him from learning anything important, and taking into account that none of the teachers will punish him for telling Draco Lockhart's favourite colour...

"I will," Harry says, "But if I tell you what the answers are - just what the answers are, mind, I'm not going to highlight the passages in your books for you - you have to teach me something." Draco arches an eyebrow, and Hermione glances between them.

"Your house is very strange," she says, "I hope you realize that." Harry sighs.

"The Ravenclaws do this too, Hermione. It's not our fault Gryffindors have no concept of the quid pro quo." Hermione snorts, and she looks between them, expectant as Draco seems to think of what sort of knowledge he can offer in return. Then, he reaches into his inside pocket, pulling out the notebook he uses for his spells, and then he leans over, taking a piece of parchment and copying out some wand diagrams and some spell instructions. His notebook is then returned to his inner pocket.

Harry and Hermione both lean over, looking at the paper curiously. "Snake Summons? That sounds like high-level transfiguration."

"I can do it," Draco says defensively, "And this counts as knowledge."

"Prove it works," Harry says, and Draco stares at him. Harry, in truth, believes that Draco can cast the spell, or he wouldn't have copied it out from his little book for Harry and Hermione - he's not stupid, and he wouldn't try and pass off a spell as real without it being so. But Draco didn't know this spell at the end of last year, which means he must have learned it over the summer, and he wouldn't cast a spell for the first time in mixed company.

"What?" Draco says, indignant.

"Prove you can do the spell, and that it works, and I'll give you the answers."

"For Merlin's sake, Potter-" Draco pulls out his wand, and Harry's suspicions are confirmed: Draco does cast magic at home, likely with his parents' tutelage. It doesn't really surprise him, but it's nice information to file away. "Serpensortia!" Harry watches Draco's wand movement as he casts the spell, and then he watches the burst of yellow light from the end of the wand as the snake bursts forwards.

In hindsight, this was probably a bad spell to request he perform in the middle of the Great Hall.

"What the Hell are you doing over there?" comes a sharp reproach from the other side of the room, and Draco, Hermione and Harry hurriedly stand on top of the Great Hall's bench as they stare down at the

snake. It's perhaps three feet long, and it looks a bit angry about its situation. Francois Richelieu runs over, and he stops about six feet away, staring at the serpent, which is now coiling in on itself, raising its head and looking threateningly around the room. The Gryffindors further up the table begin to inch away. "Do you know the spell to Vanish it?" Frank asks Draco, and after a short pause, Draco rapidly, mutely, shakes his head.

Frank calls for one of the Ravenclaw prefects to run and get a teacher, and Harry focuses on the snake. Its head is weaving from side to the other, its tongue darting from its mouth every few seconds, and Harry doesn't think he's imagining it when he hears it say, _**"Where?"**_

"This is Hogwarts," Harry whispers back, barely aware of the way he draws out the sibilance in the words, and the snake turns to stare at him with its small, amber eyes. _"Can you talk?"_

"Of course I can talk," the snake says loftily, _"We are not as __**dim-witted**__ as you upright pigs."_ Harry's never been called an upright pig before: the insult strikes him as slightly ill-suited.

"Uh, can you, you know? Leave?"

_"I was __**summoned**__ here."_

"Yes, but it's much nicer outside. There are mice, rats-"

"Rats?" repeats the snake, tilting its head to the side and seeming pleased at the idea, _"Take me there._"

"Can't you just, you know, go yourself? It's just out of that door and then through the next one."

"No," it says petulantly, _"Too far._" Frank, Hermione and Draco are all staring at Harry as he very slowly, very cautiously, steps off the bench. Harry creeps forwards, making his way closer to the snake.

"Potter!" hisses Francois, "What do you think you're doing? That's an adder!"

"It's fine!" Harry says quickly, and he kneels down, putting out his arms, "If you bite me, I'm going to drop you in the lake," he promises, and the snake nods its head in a gesture of assent, slithering forwards and coiling itself slowly around the length of Harry's arm. Harry doesn't feel scared any more: he likes snakes, and this one isn't quite as intimidating now he has it in his hands.

Harry walks quickly into the entrance hall and outside, leaning down to let the snake drop itself into the nearby bushes, and the snake doesn't so much as thank him as it disappears into the underbrush. Harry makes his way back into the Great Hall, and everyone in the room seems to be staring at him. There are maybe twenty students dotted along each of the tables, and Frank comes forwards, grabbing Harry by the collar and hauling him into the entrance hall again. Draco runs to follow them, holding both his own bag and

Harry's.

"What? I couldn't just bloody leave it there, could I?"

"You spoke to it," Frank says, pulling him bodily down the corridor, and Harry tries to pull away from the older boy's grip, but Francois keeps tight hold of him.

"So? What else was I meant to bloody do?" The prefect holds tightly to the scruff of Harry's neck as he makes his way towards the potions classroom. Mercifully, Snape's classroom is currently empty, and the man himself is in his office, making disparaging comments in red ink on the essays stacked before him.

"Professor Snape," Francois says, and the potions master glances up, arching an eyebrow as he glances from Harry to Draco.

"What now?" he asks, curling a lip in disgust.

"Potter's just released an adder onto the grounds," Francois says. Snape stares at Harry, black eyes boring into Harry's own.

"I couldn't leave it in the Great Hall!" Harry says as a defence of himself.

"Why, Potter, was there an adder in the Great Hall?"

"Draco summoned it." Snape's gaze flickers to Draco, who shrinks slightly under his Head of House's gaze.

"Because Potter told me to!"

"Would you jump off a bridge if I told you to?"

"Shut up, both of you!" Francois says loudly, finally letting Harry go. "But the reason I brought Potter here is because he's a Parselmouth." Snape's expression changes just slightly, and he frowns at Harry.

"I'm not a Parselmouth," Harry says, "I'm not Slytherin's heir or something, am I?"

"Did you speak to the snake, Potter?" Snape asks briskly.

"Of course I did. How do you think I convinced it not to bite me?" Snape breathes in, and then he pinches the bridge of his nose, looking like he's doing his level best to remain calm.

"Potter," Snape says finally, in a low, even tone. "If you were speaking to the snake, and it understood you, you were speaking Parseltongue."

"I was speaking English!"

"No, Potter, you weren't," Francois says, and Harry stares up at him. "From what we know of Parseltongue, it's not like Draco and I speaking French. You might have heard yourself and the snake speaking in English, but all the rest of us heard were you hissing back and forth." Harry is silent, staring into the middle distance. He'd read the history of Salazar Slytherin, about the mythical Chamber of

Secrets and about how he could supposedly speak to snakes, but...

"Five points from Slytherin for performing dangerous magic in the halls without supervision, Mr Malfoy."

"Aren't you going to do anything, sir?" Francois asks, and Snape stares at him, seeming mildly taken aback by the question.

"Do anything?" he repeats.

"About Potter."

"What is it you suggest I do, Prefect Richelieu? Gag the boy? Banish every snake from the castle? Call in the press?" Frank falters, and Snape returns to his desk, sitting down once more and dipping his quill in his pot of red ink. There's a pause as the three of them stand in the doorway, staring at their head of house, and after a few moments, Snape glances up at them, "Get out."

* * *

><p>"Is this bad?" Harry asks quietly once they get into the common room, and Malfoy lingers to hear Frank's response. Francois had looked worried all the way back to the Common Room, and now he looks at Harry seriously before he sighs.<p>

"It will be all over the school that you were involved in the summoning of a snake, and that you then talked to it. Parseltongue is an exceedingly rare skill, Harry, and virtually all Parselmouths are descended from Slytherin: people think of Parselmouths as dark magic practitioners as soon as they know what they are."

"It'll be all over the school by now," Harry says, and Frank nods his head, patting Harry's shoulder.

"Stay in here for now, okay? We'll see how the rest of the houses are at dinner, and then we can respond from there." Harry goes into the common room proper, and, seeing Harry's pale features as he walks past, he hears the other Slytherins ask Frank what happened. Harry stays in his dorm for a little while, taking the time to unpack the books and clothes from his trunk he hadn't yet done, and then he walks out into the common room again.

"Oh, cheer up, Potter," Blaise Zabini says as soon as he comes in, throwing an arm around his shoulders. "Maybe you sound smarter in Parseltongue."

"Shut up!" Harry says immediately, shoving the other boy, but by no means is the ribbing upsetting: it's actually comforting that Blaise is still making fun of him, even when it's about this.

"Come on, then," Theodore says, "You can't discover you're a Parselmouth and not demonstrate for us."

"He's right, you know," says Daphne Greengrass, "We'd just be terribly upset if you were to deny us a little whimsy."

"I didn't know whimsy was your thing, Daphne," Harry says, and she gives a little shrug of her shoulders, tossing her hair. "I don't

think I can do it without looking at a snake - I've done it before. I set a boa constrictor on my cousin once."

"Well, he's just gone up rather a lot in my estimation," Blaise says in a light, conversational tone, "Nothing like snake-based attempted murder to bolster one's friendship."

"I didn't try and kill him," Harry says, pushing the other boy to sit down as he drops onto the arm of one of the green, leather sofas in front of the fireplace. "I just scared him a bit." He glances around for a good likeness of a snake in the common room, of which there are a fair few, and he settles on the Slytherin crest mounted over the nearest fireplace. The snake is carefully painted on the wood of the shield, and Harry focuses it on it, imagining its coil moving and shifting as he looks at it. "_This is me speaking Parseltongue,_" he says, and the Slytherins around him each laugh and "ooh", nudging each other. Harry knows there are other people dotted around the common room craning their necks and straining their ears to listen, but for the time being he ignores them.

That is, until there's a quiet grind from the wall, and a large piece of stone beside the fireplace slides to the right, disappearing into the wall beside the chimney flue: a dark passageway is left open, letting cold air draught into the room, and the six of them stare, wide-eyed, at the opening.

"Go get Professor Snape, Blaise," says Afifa, coming up and putting her hands on Harry's shoulders, keeping him in his place on the sofa. Blaise all but scrambles towards the common room exit as the other Slytherins begin to gather around, all of them leaning to try and stare into the new hall that's opened up. It's dark, but Harry thinks he can see unlit torches lining its walls. "What did you say, Potter?"

"Nothing. Nothing, I just said that I was speaking Parseltongue, it was just so they could hear-"

"Shush," Afifa says sharply, squeezing his shoulder. "It's fine. They find secret rooms all the time."

"When was the last time someone found an official secret room?" Harry asks, glancing up at Afifa. Other Slytherins lean to watch her face, and Afifa breathes in. There's a short pause.

"Shut up, Potter."

"Yes, Ma'am."

29. Year Two: The Empty Library

Snape comes into the common room with Blaise a few minutes later, and he tells the prefects to help him move the sofas closest to the new entrance out of the way, forcing the students back a little. "Come away from this part of the common room, if you will," Snape orders briskly, and the Slytherins move back by about two feet, but as soon as Snape turns to glance into the little hall, all of the students step back to where they were before.

He doesn't bother to correct them.

The Slytherin entrance opens once more, and Harry glances at McGonagall and Dumbledore as they enter the common room, the both of them looking rather harried. Despite McGonagall's Gryffindor house, Harry can't help but think that in her deep green robes and similar hat, she matches the Slytherin common room's colour scheme perfectly. He wouldn't be stupid enough to say so, of course, but he's allowed to think it.

"Incendio," Dumbledore casts quietly, lighting the torches on the inside of the little corridor, but Harry can only see two torches in the little hall before it takes a sharp left turn: without actually sticking his head into the hall, he can't see what it leads into.

The Slytherins reluctantly move to sit down around the common room as the three teachers disappear into the new room. Homework lies uncompleted on tables, students pretending to work on it as they listen carefully for whatever sound they can glean from the quiet echoes of McGonagall's voice; more than a few of them curse Snape and Dumbledore's respective tendency to speak in barely more than a whisper.

Harry sits with Afifa and some of the other seventh years, and while they're making an attempt to talk about a new shop opening on an offshoot of Diagon Alley, one with a 17+ age line on its entranceway. Harry would normally want to find out anything he could about a shop like that, but for the time being he's as distracted as the seventh years are.

When Dumbledore finally comes out of the room, followed by McGonagall and Snape, the Slytherins are all on the edges of their seats, leaning right forwards and watching Dumbledore in the most rapt silence he's likely ever heard from Slytherin house.

"Now then," Dumbledore says pleasantly, putting his hands together, "I believe it is time for us to go to the great hall for dinner, children."

"But, Professor," Afifa says, "What is it?"

"Time for dinner," Dumbledore repeats in a surprisingly kind and grandfatherly tone, given the number of eyes boring into him. The Slytherins mill about in their places, making their reluctance known.

"Go," orders Snape, and they each move towards the door. It would normally be proper etiquette to allow staff to lead the students from the common room, but McGonagall and Snape purposefully hang back, presumably to make sure no one tries to stay in the common room and come to dinner late. Harry moves along with the other Slytherins, and he waves to Hermione as he comes into the hall.

"Are you okay?" she mouths at him, furrowing her brow.

"Yeah. No detention," Harry mouths back, and she looks surprised, but gives him a thumbs up before she turns back to her conversation with Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown. Judging by their expressions, Hermione is enjoying it more than they are - Harry guesses they started out talking about Lockhart, and that Hermione got off track

talking about actual defence against the dark arts.

"Excuse me!" says a voice behind him, and Harry turns, glancing down at the younger boy. His robes are a little overlarge for him, partly because he's so skinny, Harry suspects, and the little Gryffindor is wide-eyed and looking up at Harry. "Aren't you Harry Potter?"

"No," Harry lies, "I'm Draco - Harry's over there-"

"No, no, you're Harry Potter, I can see your scar!" he says excitedly, and it's only now that Harry sees the camera around Colin's neck. "Is it true that you're a Parselmouth? Does your scar ever hurt? Could I get your autograph? Do-"

"What's your name?" Harry asks loudly, cutting through the other boy's nonsense, and the kid stares up at him.

"Colin! Colin Creevey!"

"Go sit down, Colin," Harry says.

"But-"

"No. You want to talk to me, you don't do it at dinner," Harry says clearly, and he turns around, sitting beside Blaise and adjusting his collar, feeling more than a little bit uncomfortable. Creevey's only a year younger than him, but the awe he'd been directing at Harry had been... Uncomfortable. He scurries off to the Gryffindor table, sitting with some of his first year friends, and Harry shakes his head.

"I thought you liked attention," Theodore says in a teasing tone, nudging him, and Harry shakes his head, pressing his lips together.

"Attention's fine, but I want friends and allies, Theodore. What sort of idiot wants blind followers?" There's an uncomfortable silence, and Harry realizes the unfortunate nature of his phrasing all at once, a thick, sick feeling sinking down and into his stomach. For once, he's grateful when Dumbledore starts to talk.

"Eat, everyone. The next few days will be interesting for you." With that cryptic message, Dumbledore sits down, and food appears on the table. Harry eats in mostly silence, listening to the other second years theorize as to the new room; there's quiet talk all up and down the Slytherin table, and it's a nice distraction. Whenever Harry glances back towards the other house tables he can see groups of students watching him and whispering about him, whispering about how he's a Parselmouth.

And that's without even knowing what he'd unlocked in the common room.

* * *

><p>"Oh," Harry whispers as Afifa pushes him forwards and into the room.<p>

It's a broad room with eight neat, symmetrical walls, and the octagon is continued in the ceiling, where eight sheets of black glass are

drawn into a centrepiece. The glass shines in the light from the torches that have now been lit, reflecting it down again. It's a modest library, with four of its walls holding floor-to-ceiling shelves, and in the middle of the room is another torch, four shelves spanning out from it in a plus sign.

The shelves are only three feet high, and along their surface is a thick layer of dust, but not a single one of the shelves around them is holding a book. The only piece of furniture is the library's central desk, upon which is a large, leather-bound book not dissimilar to the one in the main library. Harry looks at it, turning one of the pages, but the parchment is utterly blank: it's not like Mrs Pince's book, which has dozens of library books listed on each page.

"It's empty," Harry says, and a seventh year pats his back.

"Cheer up," he says lightly, "It won't be for long."

"What do you mean?" Harry asks, and the boy laughs. Alexi, Harry thinks his name is.

"Do you truly think, Potter, that a library adjoining our common room is going to go unused?" The boy gives him a little grin and Harry smiles a little, heading to the dormitories for bed. He pulls down his copy of Dastardly Defences, beginning to study the Pimple Jinx.

Draco mumbles a "goodnight" to him, crawling under his covers and pressing his face into the pillows. Harry smiles at the green and blond lump in the next bed, shaking his head, and looks back to his book, dimming the candle on his side of the bed and pulling the curtains on the right side of his bed. The curtains of their beds are thick, and they block most of the light.

Not that Draco would actually notice.

Harry is almost entirely certain Draco could sleep through several explosions if he had a thick enough blanket: for someone so incredibly focused on his own dignity in day-to-day life, Draco's sleeping positions are usually the furthest from dignity one could get.

Harry reads for an hour or so, but when he sets the book aside, he isn't actually ready to go to sleep yet: he shifts on the bed, and then he slides slowly forwards, pulling his invisibility cloak out of the bottom of his trunk. Draco is quietly snoring, the sound nearly entirely muffled by the pillows around his head, and one of his legs sticks haphazardly out from under the bedsheet. Harry really needs to buy himself a camera.

He slips the cloak on over his head, creeping down the corridor and out into the common room. The Slytherin prefects are gathered around one of the tables, discussing who would be willing to donate books to the Slytherin library and which books they ought try hardest to get hold of. Harry leans forwards, looking at the plans: Francis Drummond, a prefect as of this year, has made a rough sketch of the library's plan, and has pencilled in new furniture to be added over the holidays.

Harry can't help but smile as he creeps towards the new little hall off the corridor.

The library's torches have been extinguished, so once Harry is safely in the room he whispers, "Lumos," and pulls the cloak off. The desk, carved of mahogany, is a beautiful piece of furniture: each of the legs is carved to resemble tentacles coiling together as they reach down to the ground, and he can't help but think it's a bit incongruous with the usual serpentine image, but that doesn't mean it's not well done.

Harry crouches at the desk, leaning down and carefully pulling open one of its drawers. As expected, it's empty, but when he pulls the second drawer forwards there's a flutter of parchment coming loose, and he frowns, leaning to watch as it drops onto the ground.

Dumbledore must have missed it earlier, and Harry guesses it was caught in the mechanism at the back of one of the drawers, so he sits back, cross-legged, and looks at it. The parchment is old, and on one side the page is filled with notes on a spell Harry doesn't recognize, but the other is full of sketches. These aren't the rough, procedural drawings he'd just seen Francis Drummond scribble to get an approximation for a room's size, though: these are done in careful pencil, showing a snake wrapping itself around a dagger, a skull made into an inkpot with a quill sticking out of it, a snake's face split in two, displaying the skull under the flayed-off scales...

In a curiously morbid way, the drawings are beautiful, and Harry doesn't want to leave them to be thrown away when the desk is next moved around: without a second thought, he folds the parchment neatly and puts it into his pocket, hiding himself under the cloak again to return to bed.

He doesn't know what it means that he's a Parselmouth, and he sees no reason it should put people into such a frenzy, but he decides, as he slips the old sketches into his letter organiser, that he shouldn't resent it. Theodore has one of the quotes from A Serpentine History on a plaque in his and Blaise's room: To reject a path towards a skill is preference; to reject a talent one possesses innately is stupidity.

Harry slides into bed, putting his head on the pillow, and he closes his eyes.

Being a Parselmouth is the easy part, he thinks. It's keeping Lockhart from talking about it that's going to be hard.

30. Year Two: Historical Significance

Harry makes his way down to breakfast with Blaise and Theodore the next day, and Harry tells them (without mentioning the cloak, of course) what he'd heard the prefects planning the night before. Theodore nods his head in obvious approval, liking the idea of having a library immediately to hand.

"Do you think it will have the same restrictions to content as the main library?" Blaise asks thoughtfully, "Draco's father has been trying to have some texts added to it for years now."

"It depends on if Dumbledore is in charge of overseeing the list, or if Snape is," Theodore replies, frowning slightly. "I don't think there's much of a loophole there, though."

"Good," Harry says, "I looked up some of the books he's mentioned, and no one needs books like that in a school. If people so desperately want to read some fantasy story about how Muggleborns are the end of the society, they can buy their own copy." Blaise frowns at him.

"They're just facts, Harry," he says, and Harry sniggers, shaking his head. He doesn't even bother to start the argument this early in the morning; he's not really willing to entertain anything that says Jon and Peggy Granger are any kind of threat to the wizarding way of life. Besides, his mum was Muggleborn.

"Yeah, Blaise, sure they are," he says sarcastically: Blaise's lips purse, his eyes narrowing in obvious anger, and he gets ready to argue, but they stop short just before entering the entrance hall. There are two wizards in deep, purple robes, and beside them Harry sees a photographer, looking at the film in his camera. "What the Hell are they doing here?"

"You discovered a secret library that might have been built by Salazar Slytherin himself, and you're surprised the press is going to report on it?" Theodore asks, and Harry groans. He hurries towards the great hall, just wanting to get in and have breakfast, but a hand grabs tightly on the collar of his robes.

"Harry!" Lockhart proclaims, pulling him around. The reporters latch eyes on him, and Harry tries to pull himself free as they come forwards. "Why don't we have a photo together for the Prophet?" The photographer is raising his camera, so Harry stamps down hard on the toe of one of Lockhart's pretentious two-tone shoes, and Lockhart lets Harry go as he cries out. Harry runs into the great hall, moving to sit down between Hermione and Parvati Patil at the Gryffindor table.

"Got confused, did you?" Parvati asks.

"There are reporters that want to take photos of me," Harry says, and Parvati stares at him perplexedly, obviously not understanding why he'd want to avoid that sort of press attention. "Right, Hermione- You've heard how I'm a Parselmouth?"

"Percy was explaining it this morning," Hermione explains, nodding her head. "That's so interesting, Harry, you know there hasn't been a known Parselmouth at Hogwarts since-" Harry feels that if he lets Hermione continue this train of thought, it will be difficult to get any words in edgeways, so he simply talks over her.

"I found a secret library in the Slytherin common room." Hermione's mouth freezes mid-infodump, and she stares at Harry, looking as if four birthdays, two Christmases and Flourish and Blotts' mid-February sale have come all at once.

"Oh my God!"

"There aren't any books in it," he tells her quickly, and her face

falls.

"Oh," she says, less excitedly, "But you found a secret library?" Harry explains as they begin to eat, and for the most part the Gryffindors just ignore him - occasionally, Colin Creevey will crane his neck to try to catch Harry's eye, but Harry does his best to ignore it.

"Hi, Harry," Ginny says brightly as she comes down to the table, and Harry smiles at her. "Did you make the right decision and swap houses?"

"Oh, damn, sorry, I meant to sit at the Ravenclaw table-" Hermione snorts, shoving Harry in the side, and Ginny lets out a little laugh, moving to sit with Creevey and some of the other first years further up the table. Now she's settled in at Hogwarts, Ginny seems much more confident and happy: most importantly, she no longer looks at Harry like he's some sort of mythical being that just walked out of the lake.

"She's doing pretty well," Hermione says, seeming to guess Harry's train of thought, and Harry nods his head. "She keeps messing about with the twins, teasing Percy - she's really enjoying it here, and she's even learned a few jinxes." Harry pokes at what remains of his scrambled eggs with his fork, settling into silence as he waits for Hermione to finish her cereal.

No reporters show themselves as they split up for History of Magic and Charms, and Harry forgets about them entirely by the time he and Hermione walk across the grass and settle down on a blanket. The grass is wet with dew, and even though the wind is a little biting, the sun is out and shining warmly on them. Professor Flitwick had told them there'd likely be snow tomorrow, but for the time being the sky is mostly clear.

"Serpensortia," Harry whispers, putting his wand forwards. Nothing happens. Hermione frowns.

"I think it's more like this," she says, and she sweeps her own hand forwards, "Serpensortia!" Her wand lets out a little hiss, but no snake bursts forth.

Harry flicks his wrist a little more: "Serpensortia!" The "snake" that flops forwards is blue, utterly limp, and rubbery. Harry picks it up, feeling it flop in his hands, and Hermione starts to laugh. He hits her with it, and she shoves him away from her, letting out a horrified noise at the thing's damp, gel-like surface and its texture: he lets out a laugh of his own, and then he turns, throwing the thing as hard as he can down the hill into the bushes.

Scandalized, Hermione puts her hand over her mouth, and Harry tries to cast the spell again.

* * *

><p>Harry stares down at the photo of him and Hermione laughing together in the paper, lips twisted into a scowl. It's the new morning edition, and the animation shows Hermione and Harry laughing together: it's a nice photo, actually, and Harry's going to cut it

out and keep it, but... He hates that it's in the paper. He hates that it's presented next to a photo captioned, Harry Potter's favoured mentor, Gilderoy Lockhart. He hates the whole tone of the article, which acts like he's done some phenomenally difficult thing by hissing in front of a doorway he didn't even know was there.<p>

"It's a nice photo of you and Granger, at least," Theodore says, reading the irritation on Harry's face, and Harry nods his head. "You mastered that spell to cut things yet?"

"Nope," Harry replies, "Would you?"

"Sure," he says, taking the paper, and Harry watches the movement of his hands carefully as he trims around the edge of the photo, pulling it away from the paper. Harry takes it, folding it into his bag, and the paper itself he abandons on the table as he exits the room and makes his way up the stairs towards Transfiguration.

When he arrives at the classroom, McGonagall and Snape are talking outside of the door, and Harry hovers in the corridor, glancing between them. Snape gestures, silently, for Harry to follow him, and Harry sighs, reluctantly following his head of house down the stairs again. There's no sense in arguing, he's sure, and when Snape leads him to a gargoyle on the second floor.

"Liquorice All-Sorts," Snape bites out, and Harry furrows his brow at the strange password as the gargoyle leaps aside to let them upstairs.

"Liquorice All-Sorts?" he repeats. "What, does he like those?"

"Last month," Snape says despairingly, "It was Disco Discs."

"What's a Disco Disc?" Harry asks. It sounds like the sort of drug that centres in soap dramas in Muggle TV.

Snape arches an eyebrow, glancing at him, and then says, "It's the wrong name for a Dazzle Drop." Harry blinks at him, wondering what the Hell a Dazzle Drop is. They reach the top of the stairs, and Harry looks curiously around the room they enter as Snape walks forwards and towards the desk.

"Ah, Harry, you're here," Dumbledore says, standing from behind his desk as Snape sinks down into a chair, lips pressed together. He looks really annoyed, and Harry glances from him to Dumbledore, unsure of what's going on, but then he sees the other two people in the room. The first is a tall, black woman with deep, brown eyes and a short, neatly trimmed afro: the underpiece of her robes is lacy and white, but the outer fabric is a popping cherry red. The collar of the under robes is high, coming right up to her neck like Snape's does, but the outer robes are cut low in a V, showing most of her chest, and she wears black Muggle boots that seem incongruous with the obvious wizarding outfit. The man beside her is only a little taller than Snape, maybe 5'10", and his robes are a plain green: he has dark brown hair, and he's even paler than Snape, but in a way that looks healthy. His skin isn't nearly as sallow, for one.

"I'm here," Harry agrees, "Look, is this important?"

"No," Snape says.

"Yes," Dumbledore says. Harry looks at the headmaster sceptically, and Dumbledore smiles at him before he says, "Allow me to introduce you to Lindon Sartorius," the pale man gives a neat incline of his head, "And Cecilia Hayworth." The woman smiles at him, and Harry stares at the both of them before he glances back to Dumbledore, and then to Snape.

"Are you two, like, the real...?"

"The ones who wrote the books," Hayworth says, "Yeah." She's got an Irish accent. "I wrote An Introduction to the Wizarding World, which you might have been given when you were sorted?"

"I've got Catastrophes of the Recent Past, too. And then of course I've got Ministerial Insight and A Serpentine History, and I know you also wrote the introduction to the 1990 edition of The Heirs of Salazar Slytherin, Mr Sartorius." Harry can't help but feel surprised - wizarding academic books don't tend to have the descriptions of their authors, and he'd assumed that both Hayworth and Sartorius would be well into their eighties, but they're both only in their thirties, maybe approaching forty.

"Indeed, I did," he says quietly, with the same clipped, aristocratic tones the Malfoys, the Greengrasses, and the Zabini's use. Pureblood aristocracy, then, Harry guesses. "And of course, I am aware of your defeat of the Dark Lord as of 1981. Your best work, I should think." Harry laughs: it's rare that someone actually makes a joke like that to his face, and rarer still that the joke strikes him as funny.

"Ms Hayworth and Mr Sartorius are here, Harry, to investigate and examine the library in the Slytherin common room."

"We wish to locate artefacts and books that might have been buried somewhat in recent years, as well as to work out when this library was built, and by whom," Sartorius says, smoothing out on an imaginary crease on his robe, "We would like to utilize your unique talent, Mr Potter."

"Your Parseltongue," Hayworth supplies, "For the moment, we just want to look at the library, but after the holidays we'd like you to help us look through the castle, and use Parseltongue in front of certain snake symbols. If a Parselmouth could open that passage, others might be hidden around the castle, locked in the same way - it would have been a perfect method for Slytherin to restrict access to only himself and his heirs." Her eyes are bright, and she's visibly excited at the prospect: Sartorius, in contrast, stands with his hands behind his back and a neutral expression on his face.

Harry glances at Snape, who is watching the exchange with pursed lips and a disinterested expression, as if the two historians have come into Hogwarts to sell Harry a new brand of Hoover. It sounds like a lot of effort for a subject Harry isn't extraordinarily interested in, and he considers downright refusing, but...

After an extended pause, Sartorius says, "We would, of course, pay you for your time, Mr Potter, and moreover, you would be credited with any relevant finds." Harry doesn't need the money, but the idea of being credited is intriguing, and there'll probably be other

rewards. Not to mention, Hermione would probably murder him if he turned the opportunity down, and Harry's quite keen on surviving the year.

"Alright," Harry says. "Can I go now?"

"Of course, Mr Potter, but before you go," Dumbledore says, but first he holds out a bowl full of white-chocolate buttons covered in hundreds and thousands, "Would you like a Disco Disc?"

* * *

><p>Harry watches Lockhart at the staff table that night, and he can see that he's somewhat put out at the whispers around the room. Some of them are about Harry himself, but the vast majority are about the new people sat at the end of the staff table, talking quietly with each other. New people at Hogwarts always raise a few eyebrows, especially new people under the age of 50, and Harry has already heard some of the older Slytherin lads talking about Cecilia Hayworth's backside.<p>

Lockhart is making conversation with Flitwick, who seems to be doing his best to turn away and talk to Sprout instead, but Lockhart's heart isn't in his boasting tonight: he keeps leaning back to look at Hayworth and Sartorius, or letting his gaze flicker over the room to settle on the students who seem to be most focused on the two historians.

"What houses were they in?" Blaise asks Afifa Lanjwani as they make their way downstairs.

"Hayworth was a Ravenclaw, and Sartorius was in Slytherin," she answers. "They were in the same year as your father, apparently, Draco." Draco puts his chin in the air, seeming proud of this fact, despite his having nothing to do with it beyond blood relation, and Harry rolls his eyes.

* * *

><p>Lucius Malfoy, when Harry writes him, is not forthcoming with information. He brushes the both of them off with a "I didn't really know either of them," but Harry is sure he must have at least known Sartorius, were they in the same set of dormitories at school, and he considers asking Snape about them, but he's aware that asking Snape any unacademic questions is usually a bad idea. Except for asking him about Disco Discs, apparently-<p>

Harry looks up from his letter from Lucius Malfoy.

"Snape was raised by Muggles," Harry blurts out. Harry's an idiot, truly: he's seen Jazzies before, or Disco Discs, or Dazzle Drop, or whatever stupid thing you want to call them, and Harry knows they're not a wizarding sweet. Hermione looks up from her Charms essay, peering at him.

"Malfoy said that?"

"No, Snape did. He told me."

"I doubt he told me."

"Indirectly, he did." Harry sets his letter aside, explaining quickly, and Hermione takes it into account, nodding her head.

"I'm not surprised he's not forthcoming about it usually, Harry," she says lightly, "He is head of Slytherin house."

"He's friends with Lucius Malfoy," Harry says, folding the letter and dropping it into his bag to think about later. "It just seems weird that they're friends, if Snape's Muggleborn."

"You don't know he's Muggleborn," Hermione points out, and then he leans forwards, getting a better look at the library entrance. Harry follows her gaze: Lindon Sartorius' expensive shoes make barely any noise at all on the library's floor as he approaches Madam Pince, speaking to her seriously and keeping her gaze. Sartorius' eyes are a deep grey - not the icy colour of the Malfoys', but far darker, flecked with deep brown. Madam Pince waves her hand vaguely, and Sartorius nods his head, leaving the library again.

"What was Mr Sartorius asking about, Madam Pince?" Harry asks the next time she walks by, and the librarian huffs, shrugging her shoulders.

"Library magic. As if it's hard!" With that, Pince walks off again, and Harry and Hermione share a bemused look.

When Harry makes his way down to the common room that afternoon, after lunch, Sartorius and Hayworth are in the library, and Sartorius is making rough notes on a piece of parchment as Hayworth tells him, firmly, "This is a very stupid idea. I hope you realize that."

"My dear, it is not stupid in the least," Sartorius retorts in his smooth, silky voice, and Harry wonders if he does much public speaking. Sartorius is smug, and obviously a bit up in himself, but it's nice to listen to him speak, and Harry would be much happier to hear him drone on to them in History of Magic than he is Professor Binns. Hayworth puts up her hands, shaking her head, and Sartorius leans, kissing her on the cheek in a dramatic fashion.

Harry settles in one of the leather chairs Frank had brought into the library yesterday morning, his copy of James and the Giant Peach in his lap. It's a funny book, thus far, and Harry's going to mention how much he's enjoying it when he next writes Mr and Mrs Granger; he reads in silence for the next hour or so, occasionally glancing at Hayworth to see what she's doing. She mostly seems to be making careful sketches of the room, from a bird's eye position, and then he realizes that she's trying to map where the room adjoins the castle.

Harry is just leaning forwards in his seat to see how it fits in with Hayworth's existing map of the Slytherin common room and the dungeons when there's a tap on the ceiling above them. Harry looks up, staring at the black glass, but then there's a shift in one of the panels.

Blackness seems to steam away from glass above them, and Harry stares up, wide-eyed, as half of the panel disappears, but water doesn't stream into the room from the lake. A pale hand streaks over the glass, and Lindon Sartorius leans in, giving Hayworth an obnoxious

wave from outside.

"Did he swim down here from the surface?" Harry asks, watching in horrified fascination as Sartorius holds up his wand, pulling away the layers of soil and muck clinging to the library's glass ceiling, and Hayworth nods her head.

"It's not as if I wanted to do it," she points out, and she looks up at Sartorius as he walks. He's the sort of person who scowls when he concentrates, and it seems he's concentrating hard, drawing his wand over the glass and dislodging the soil clinging to it. It rises in thick clumps into the lake water, and Sartorius pauses to Vanish it every few minutes.

A bubble is formed thickly around his head, letting him breathe under the water, but he's stripped off his outer robe entirely, and his grey underpiece clings wetly to him in the water, its skirt floating around him. He doesn't seem to be put off at all by the cold of the lake, despite it being mid-December, and he works for maybe two hours, meticulously dragging every piece of soil away from the library's ceiling.

With green-tinged light filtering in from the lake above, the library looks more open, and Harry can't understand how he'd thought the ceiling was originally just black glass: the ceiling is like that of a conservatory, and it leaves the room feeling airy and bright despite being so far under the lake's surface.

It's beautiful, Harry thinks, watching sunlight shimmer on the floor, wavy and odd after passing through the water above them. Far more beautiful than he'd ever have expected.

31. Year Two: The Wagga Wagga Werewolf

"What was wrong with Lockhart this morning?" Harry asks Hermione as they make their way up to the Defence classroom, and Hermione shakes her head.

"So, you know how you were said about Sartorius going in the lake?"

"Yeah," Harry nods his head, and Hermione sighs, seeming almost embarrassed on Lockhart's behalf.

"There were all these fifth year Ravenclaw girls out on the grounds, and they saw him coming out of the lake. He was soaked through, obviously, and once he was in the sun, the underpiece of his robes was a bit... Well. Transparent." Harry laughs. Hermione presses her lips together, obviously holding back her own laugh, "And apparently he was rather toned, and not at all bad-looking. So they went inside giggling, shared that with everyone in the school-"

"And now Lockhart's angry that people find Sartorius attractive when he's right there," Harry finishes, and Hermione slowly nods her head.

"I mean, they've both got their good points, of course," Hermione says, "And they look quite different, but both are rather nice." Harry gives her a sideways look, and she catches him, shoving him in

the side. "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything, Hermione," Harry replies, smirking to himself, "Both are rather nice. I think you should go for Sartorius, personally. He's got a brain in his head."

"Stop it," Hermione demands, and she rushes ahead of Harry in the corridor to avoid whatever he's going to say next: she stops in front of the DADA classroom's door, though, and Harry watches her for a moment. "Look," she says, and he follows her finger as she points.

The poster is obscenely bright, painted in a popping red, with a portrait of Lockhart front and centre in the image. He shoots them his winning smile as he gestures to the text printed in block white letters. ****DUELLING CLUB! TAUGHT BY THE TALENTED GILDEROY LOCKHART!**** In tiny letters, printed in the very corner of the page in black, are the words _Assisted by Severus Snape_.

"This should be good," Harry says, "And on the last day before the holidays, too - tonight should be more exciting than we expected."

"What's it like, staying over the holidays?"

"It's alright. A bit boring, but there's a lot of space to get study done," Harry says, and Hermione nods her head. Jon and Peggy hadn't minded at all when Hermione had said she'd wanted to stay for Christmas: Harry's fairly certain that she'd decided to keep him company over the holiday, and he can't help but be grateful. They make their way into the classroom, settling at a desk beside Parvati, and they wait for Lockhart to arrive.

As always, he does so dramatically, exactly four minutes late, throwing open the door and doing his best to make his robes flare out behind him as he enters the classroom. They give a woeful flip of fabric before returning to Lockhart's sides, and Harry shakes his head, putting his hand on his chin.

Every class with Lockhart is the same. He talks at length about one of his books, and they re-enact some ridiculous scene from one of them, and Lockhart talks about how fabulous he was without actually teaching them anything: they're only at the end of one term, and Harry's already tired of him.

"Professor Lockhart?" Harry asks, raising his hand. Lockhart is in the process of writing Wagga Wagga Wearwolf on the blackboard in his ridiculous, looping handwriting, and Harry isn't even going to point out that he's misspelled the word.

"Yes, Harry!" Lockhart says, beaming widely as he whirls around to face the class.

"Did you study werewolves at school, sir?" Lockhart pauses for a moment, apparently thrown by the question, but then he shows all his teeth again in that big, wide grin again.

"Why, of course I did, Harry, but everything valuable about these monsters I learned upon leaving," he answers, tossing back his hair like a woman in a shampoo advert, and Harry watches him for a moment.

He doesn't think he imagines the momentary panic that passes through Lockhart's eyes as he meets Harry's gaze. "Why do you ask?"

"It's just, I've read different books on werewolves..." Harry begins, and he sees Hermione cover her mouth beside him. Everyone in the class, Slytherins and Gryffindors alike, are watching Harry curiously, craning their heads and leaning out of their chairs to get a good look at him as he talks, "One of them, Lycanthropy In Society, talks about how dangerous lycanthropy is, and what a danger werewolves are to our society." Harry sees Lockhart open his mouth, but he goes on talking before Lockhart can interrupt him, "But other books I've read, like The Plight Of The Wolf, talk about the tragedy of lycanthropy, especially because it can't be cured. Once you've been bitten, or even clawed, it doesn't matter how long you stay in St Mungo's - the disease will have been passed onto you."

Lockhart is staring at him with the same rapt silence of Harry's peers, though perhaps for a different reason. "But in Wandering With Werewolves, you detail your brave defeat of the Wagga Wagga Werewolf..." Lockhart's stiff form sags with release, and he preens, offering Harry a charming smile. "But you don't detail your casting of the Homorphus Charm."

"Oh, no, no, my boy, it's very complex magic," Lockhart says airily, waving one of his perfectly manicured hands and leaning back on his desk. "You'd have to wait quite some before you could possibly attempt it."

"Oh, I don't want to attempt it, sir," Harry says simply. "I just wonder why you haven't shared it with the Ministry of Magic, in order that so many lives could be saved from rogue werewolves. I mean, it's not a all-out cure, but imagine the drop in potential casualties if you could force a werewolf back into their human form - I mean, not to criticize you, Professor Lockhart, but keeping that sort of magic to yourself seems very selfish." The Slytherins chuckle to themselves around the room as Lockhart opens and closes his mouth, looking at Harry desperately.

He hears Lavender Brown mutter sharply to Dean Thomas that Harry shouldn't be questioning Lockhart like this, and Harry can see that Lockhart is breathing a little faster than he was before, as if he's perhaps going to lose control. "Could I have a word outside, Harry?"

"Sure, Professor Lockhart," Harry says lightly, and he stands from his desk, following the man out into the corridor.

"Now, Harry, you really oughtn't question a professor's authority - the way one presents themselves is, of course, tremendously important, and we wouldn't want anyone thinking of Harry Potter as some sort of disrespectful young man, would we? You see, Harry..." Lockhart talks for a long time, but after that point, Harry stops listening. There's nothing Lockhart could possibly say to him, in these few minutes, that could be useful or interesting, so he just stands in silence, waiting for the man to stop. "Now, is that all clear?"

"Oh, yeah, Professor. Completely clear," Harry agrees, nodding his head, and he follows Lockhart back into the classroom. With that, he proceeds to close his book, roll up his parchment, and set both into

his bag. Lockhart stands stock-still at the front of the classroom, mouth open in utter shock.

"What are you doing?" Hermione hisses.

"Going somewhere I can learn something," Harry replies, and with that, he shoulders his bag, closing the door behind him as he leaves the defence classroom. The corridors are silent and empty - they're not even twenty minutes into the lesson's period, and everyone who isn't in class will be in their respective common rooms or the library. Harry's footsteps echo a little as he walks to the staircases: the sound is satisfying.

He waits patiently as one of the staircases slowly swings towards the platform he's standing on, shifting the position of his satchel's strap on his shoulder. Using the stairs at Hogwarts has become second nature, despite the way they constantly move and intercept each other; like the weaving corridors of the dungeons, there is a sort of sense to them, and it's just a matter of focusing on the bits you need. Over the summer, whilst Harry was failing miserably at picking locks, George had said that it would never serve you to try and figure Hogwarts out - that'd only get you lost and give you a headache. Harry's done his best to internalize that advice.

He steps onto the top of the staircase, but as he starts to walk down the moving steps, Harry's caught short. He's pulled back suddenly, and he turns, staring at the strap of his bag, which seems to be stuck in midair behind him.

"Peeves?" Harry demands, gaze flickering quickly over the air behind him as he tries to pull back his bag strap. "Is that you?" There's no answer, but his strap jolts him, pulling him towards the empty air as the staircase slides slowly through the emptiness of the floor before it reaches the next platform, and Harry's eyes widen. He tries to scramble free, doing his best to duck out from the leather of his satchel, but it seems to be stuck to his shoulder and impossible to escape, and there's another ominous tug that pulls Harry a half-step closer to the edge of the staircase. There's a third, hard pull, and Harry can't resist it with nothing to grab onto: he's pulled off the stairs and he begins to fall, desperately trying to grab at a bannister or a step, or something-

He tries to grasp at a first floor staircase with a harsh, sickening crack of sound: Harry screams as he hits his forearm clumsily into the stone and keeps on falling, thrown onto his back. His fall isn't interrupted by anything else - he just whistles down to the dungeon floor, landing hard on his side with a wheezing yell.

Pressing his face to the cool of the stone underneath him and trying not to cry, he begins to call up to the ground floor for help.

* * *

><p>Harry lies on his infirmary bed in silence, twisting a piece of his sheet between his fingers. Madam Pomfrey had shoved three different potions down his throat, and while he isn't exactly in pain, his skin is itching and hot as his bruises heal at obscene speed.<p>

"What have you done, Potter?" Snape asks as he enters the hospital

wing, and Harry gives a weak shrug of his shoulders.

"I didn't do anything," Harry answers as Lockhart follows Snape into the room, and Harry stifles his wince. "I was coming out of the third floor corridor and onto the stairs, and my bag caught on something. I turned, and there wasn't anything there - I asked if it was Peeves, but there wasn't any answer, so it pulled me into the stairwell and I fell."

"And why were you coming out of the third floor corridor, Mr Potter, when you were supposed to be in Defence Against The Dark Arts?" Harry meets Snape's black gaze and utterly avoids Lockhart's.

"I left the classroom in a fit of- one second, Blaise called it something really quotable... That's it. A pique of indignation and disbelief."

"Now, Harry," Lockhart says nervously, "That's hardly fai-"

"I asked Professor Lockhart why he wouldn't share his valuable charm to turn werewolves back into people with wizarding society, and he told me that I shouldn't ask him so many questions." Snape's lips twitch in amusement, and Lockhart's perfectly moisturized cheeks turn an alarming shade of pink.

"I- well, that's not strictly-"

"No matter, Potter," Snape says, cleanly interrupting Lockhart, "Professor Dumbledore requests you detail the incident on paper. Your life, it seems, is under threat once more, Mr Potter."

"When isn't it?" Harry retorts, and Snape turns on his heel to go. Lockhart stares after him, his blue eyes wide.

"Well- Aren't you going to issue him a detention?" he demands, and Snape turns smoothly on his heel once more, staring at Lockhart with arched eyebrows.

"Why, Professor Lockhart," Snape says, putting a sarcastic emphasis on the title, "Bequeathing detentions is entirely within your own power, but I believe Mr Potter has been quite suitably punished already." Lockhart glances back at Harry, having the good grace to look at least a bit guilty, but the sympathy from Snape seems out of character. "With fairness to the boy, he did attend your lesson for twenty minutes before he left."

Harry and Lockhart both stare at Snape with their mouths open, and it's only when Lockhart rushes into the corridor after Snape that Harry begins to laugh.

Which he shouldn't do, really. Laughing with three broken ribs isn't at all enjoyable.

32. Year Two: Duelling For Idiots

At about quarter to seven that evening, walking slowly beside Hermione, Harry makes his way down to the great hall. Madam Pomfrey had reluctantly allowed Harry to leave for the duelling club, under the express instruction that he was not to actually duel himself:

Harry had quickly agreed. There'll hopefully be more meetings of the club after the holidays anyway, and he doesn't mind watching for the time being.

Harry's bones have knitted themselves together quite well, apparently, but there's still a fair amount of bruising up his side, and he's been left tender. "You think it'll go well tonight?" he asks Hermione quietly, and she gives a rueful little laugh.

"I hope so," she says. "Hello, Mr Sartorius." The historian is just stepping into the entrance hall, and he looks to Harry and Hermione with his eyebrows slightly raised.

"Hello," Sartorius says in his low, quiet voice, and he gives a polite nod of his head. "Mr Potter, why don't you introduce your friend here, as she already knows my name?" He seems to find humour in the situation, and Harry gives the man a funny look, but he does as he's told all the same.

"This is Hermione Granger," Harry says, "She's a Gryffindor."

"Indeed?" Sartorius' laugh doesn't have the same slightly sharp note that a lot of the other Purebloods' seems to have - there's no nastiness in it, and he offers his hand to Hermione. Harry can see that she's surprised, but she still shakes his hand, and offers him a little smile. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms Granger."

"Are you helping with the duelling club tonight?" Harry asks, and Sartorius gives a little shake of his head.

"Oh, no, defensive magic was never a particular skill of mine, and I'm a horrific duellist. I merely wished to enjoy the chaos from the edge of the room." As they enter the room, Hermione and Harry settle on a bench to the edge of the room, out of the way. Two of the long tables have been pushed together in the middle of the room with a thick, blue cloth covering the whole surface and making a platform for the duellists: Snape is already stood on the platform, obviously in a bad mood, and Lockhart is at the side of the room, leaning against a wall and chatting to Cecilia Hayworth. Hayworth doesn't look all that pleased to have Lockhart talking to her, and the relief on her face is obvious when Sartorius approaches, offering the both of them a winning grin.

Lockhart stiffens a little, then rushes up to the duelling platform, clambering up to stand beside Professor Snape. There are a lot of students in the room, Harry can see, all from different houses and different years, but they all go silent when Snape begins to speak.

"Duelling," he says in barely more than a whisper, "Is a time-honoured tradition in the wizarding world. It is a battle of wits, of skill, between its two opponents: it is a true test of one person's magic against another's. A wizard's duel is not a mere case of defensive spells and offensive ones - it is not merely a list of suitable spells. One must learn to move fluidly as one casts, to be ready to change one's stance and position at a half-second's notice: duelling is not for the stiff and upright, but for the constantly evolving."

Hermione and Harry listen carefully as Snape goes on, discussing the history of duelling in his quiet, measured voice. Despite being off to the side of the room, they can both hear him perfectly, owing to the utter silence of the other students watching him, and even Lockhart seems to be slightly spellbound by the way Snape talks on the subject.

"He sounds more excited about duelling than potions," Harry murmurs to Hermione, and she shakes her head slightly.

"No, remember in first year? He gave that poetic speech about what potions can be used for. I think he just likes magic." Harry turns to look at Sartorius and Hayworth, and he can see that Hayworth is murmuring something, explaining something maybe, and he wishes he could read lips.

"Professor Lockhart and I will now have a short duel, that you might observe proper procedure."

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary, do you, Severus?" Snape goes stiff as he meets Lockhart's gaze, and Harry tries not to laugh at the way Lockhart shrinks a little at the sudden glare. "Professor Snape," Lockhart amends quickly, "Why don't we just show a defensive spell first? Now," Lockhart scans the students around the table, but then he spots Harry on the other side of the room. "Harry! Why don't you come up?"

"Madam Pomfrey says he's not supposed to duel, Professor," Hermione calls back, but Lockhart is undeterred.

"Come now, come now! I'll hardly cast back!" Harry sighs, and reluctantly he pulls himself up, making his way up to the duelling platform and stepping up onto the cloth floor. Snape comes towards him, stopping him with a hand on his shoulder before he can approach Lockhart properly. His grip is tight, and he keeps Harry firmly in place.

"Know any good jinxes, Potter?" he asks so quietly Harry can barely hear him.

"You really don't like him, do you, sir?" Harry asks, but he knows better than to expect an answer, and says, "Pimple jinx, sir?"

"Good choice," Snape answers briskly, and he leans away from Harry, making his way down from the duelling platform and leaving Harry alone with Lockhart. Everyone's eyes are on them, and Lockhart offers Harry a big, wide grin as he steps back. Harry sighs.

"Now, Harry, I'm just going to cast this shield charm, and I don't want you to worry about hurting me with whatever little spell you've got planned there!"

"I'm not worried," Harry replies dryly, and Lockhart seems to misinterpret the laughter that spreads through the students gathered around the stage, because he offers them his wide, toothy smile as well. Lockhart stands, making a complicated flicking motion with his wand, and then he stands with his hands on his hips. There's an awkward silence, and Lockhart gestures for Harry to cast. Pulling back his wand and thrusting it forwards in a clean motion, Harry

says, "Furnunculus!" The sickly yellow spell flies through the air, and Lockhart bends over with a loud cry as it hits him.

He covers his face with his hands, letting out a horrified shriek, and without saying another word he flees as fast as he can from the room, sprinting out of the great hall's open doors.

"Can I go sit down now, sir?" Harry asks. Everyone is chattering loudly about the spell and why Lockhart's shield didn't work, but Snape doesn't seem at all deterred.

"Off you go, Potter," Snape says, seeming satisfied as he steps back onto the duelling platform again, and Harry retreats. He settles back on the bench beside Hermione, who shakes her head at him in obvious disapproval, but Harry refuses to feel guilty - Lockhart had told him to cast, after all. It's hardly Harry's fault he can't cast a shield charm. "Ravenclaws and Slytherins to my left, Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors to my left. The lot of you, form orderly queues. Now."

* * *

><p>At six o'clock, Snape pulls a battered, silver watch out of an inner pocket, glances at it for a moment, and declares the last duel. Once Susan Bones has won against Padma Patil, he orders, cleanly, "Go away." He'd called students up two at a time, one from each side of the room, and he'd mostly critiqued duelling stances and strategies rather than actual spellwork, but Harry still feels like he's come away having learned a lot.<p>

Snape's horrible, but even when he's telling someone they're an idiot, he usually tells them why.

"I'll see you later," Hermione tells him quietly, patting Harry's shoulder gently, and Harry gives her a little nod, making his way towards the platform again as the rest of the students file out of the room. Lockhart had never come back after fleeing, but Harry's sure that by dinner tonight he'll have gotten rid of the new pimples on his face and forgotten about the incident.

Snape sweeps back the cloth from the tables, beginning to levitate them back into their usual places, and Harry takes the chance to practice the folding charm he'd been trying to get right for the past few weeks, doing his best to spread out the long cloth and get it right. In the end, it's folded into a square - a messy square, but a square nonetheless.

He hands Snape his written account of his incident on the stairs, and Snape takes the parchment, scanning over the lines with a neutral expression on his face. "At least it's not a house elf, this time," Harry says, and Snape furrows his brow at him.

"Pardon, Potter?"

"I had this house elf bothering me over the summer - kept telling me I couldn't go back to Hogwarts, and then he stole all my post over the summer. His name is Dobby, but he's been leaving me alone, now." Snape stares at him, expression inscrutable. For a second or two, Harry thinks he's going to say something, but in the end he doesn't.

"I will give this to Professor Dumbledore, Potter," Snape says, and, taking the cloth from the table, he leaves the room.

* * *

><p>Mr Potter,

I actually did know Gilderoy Lockhart when I was at
school - I was some years above him, and he was a
Ravenclaw. He was a strange boy, very flamboyant and
_more focused on his hair than his studies - especially
for_
someone in his house - but once he left school he must
have done something right to be so accomplished.
_I didn't much like him, honestly, and thought he was a _
_bit of a pillock (don't share that with him, of course). _
He sent me the most terrible Valentine's card to me
when I was in sixth year - he'd made a collage of pictures
of his own face for the card's outside. Needless to say,
I wasn't impressed.
Hope you're well,
Amelia Bones

Harry laughs a little as he reads her response, trying to imagine a younger, stern-faced Amelia Bones with a Valentine from Lockhart in her hands. At least Lockhart isn't an idiot just for them. He writes up a quick response for her, making sure to mention that Amelia's niece had won her duel at the club tonight, and he sets it aside to give to Hedwig in the morning before picking up his copy of the Daily Prophet.

The headlines are about some French gourmet shop opening up a branch in Diagon Alley, an altercation between vampires that happened at a Weird Sisters concert, and a debate about centaur lands in the Wizengamot - none of it's really all that interesting, but Harry finds his eye caught by a little advert in the corner of page 2.

****YOUNG REPORTERS CHALLENGE****

Are you an aspiring journalist below the age of 17?
Do you have dreams of having your name in print
one day, and joining us here at the Prophet?
Send us your best article by December 23rd! The

winning article will be published on Boxing Day,
and its writer will receive 100 Galleons and six
months' free subscription to the Daily Prophet!

Harry looks at the little advert, and he cuts it out - he's still a bit clumsy with the spell, and he's not nearly as smooth with it as Theo is, but he's better with it than he was before. He grins as he holds the little advert in his hand, and he nods to himself.

He knows exactly what he's going to do with this.

End
file.